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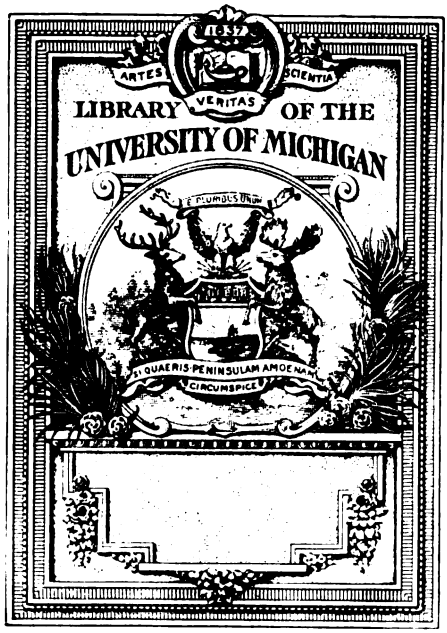
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WROTH

BY

AGNES AND EGERTON CASTLE

AUTHORS OF

"ROSE OF THE WORLD," "FRENCH NAN,"
"IF YOUTH BUT KNEW," ETC.

LONDON
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WROTH

By Agnes & Egerton Castle

IF YOUTH BUT KNEW
ROSE OF THE WORLD
FRENCH NAN
THE STAR DREAMER
THE PRIDE OF JENNICO
THE SECRET ORCHARD
THE BATH COMEDY
INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS
MY MERRY ROCKHURST
FLOWER O' THE ORANGE

By Egerton Castle

YOUNG APRIL
THE LIGHT OF SCARTHEY
CONSEQUENCES
MARSHFIELD *the* OBSERVER
LA BELLA AND OTHERS

SCHOOLS AND MASTERS OF FENCE . ENGLISH BOOK-PLATES . THE JERNINGHAM LETTERS . LE ROMAN DU PRINCE OTHON

WROTH

FOREWORD

HURLEY PRIORY stood in the midst of its denuded lands: a protest, a sermon against the wild race that had laid waste its ancient glories.

Once the home of a rich order, dedicate to the highest service, passion of the great prelate who had found a bridegroom's joy in adorning its already sumptuous beauty, it had been a prize indeed for King Harry. Greedily he had plunged his hands into the accumulated treasure of centuries: the monastery plate chests had contained wonders of art and weight; the Florentine gold casket that had held Bishop Everard's heart—placed, according to his dying wish, behind the panel of the high altar—had been studded with rubies worth in themselves a king's ransom; thirty sumpter mules had been laden with vestments and silken stuffs alone. And after the monarch had glutted and gorged himself it had still been a noble gift for his loving servant, Amyas Raby, than whom few had been more zealous in the work of purification.

Amyas Raby had been none of the breed that persecuted and despoiled his neighbour for conscience sake, through greed or yet through base complaisance. In youth the Church had robbed him of his bride and he had vowed vengeance: vengeance to be fearfully

wreaked in manhood. After a long pilgrimage of spoliation through the country he settled on the lands of Hurley Abbey—then known as Lady's Grace—to luxuriate in desecration. The walls that had echoed to holy pomp and now seemed to stand with something of a martyr's dignity at the mercy of the tormentor, might well have shuddered, have run blood as the legend had it. The Church that had been his mother, Raby struck upon the cheek; the very sanctuary of the minster he made the place of his orgies.

The portals were hewn down in order that, through yawning gateways, his horses might enter and tramp over pavements worn by the knees of generations. Round the altar, transformed into a table, his revels were held. It was from the altar-stone (tradition asserted) that blood had dripped. Matter-of-fact people disposed of the legend by suggesting that so much red wine had been spilt as well as drunk across it that it might well have poured from the table down the steps.

In time, to wild Rabys succeeded the wilder Wroths. If the kinship were somewhat remote, the original spirit of the race seemed curiously reproduced in the new owners: arrogant, fierce-tempered men, with the same animus against the monkish tradition and the same delight in its outrage. The church continued to be used as a great entrance hall to the mansion and its doors to open for the passage of horse and coach. On the sanctuary dais the Wroths still pledged brimmers across what had once been the sacred stone.

Of course, like all such heritages, the place was supposed to hold a mighty curse: the heir to the estate was ever in mortal enmity with the tenant for life: son had never been known to succeed father. The inheritance ran as erratically as wildfire—from nephew to uncle, from cousin to cousin.

The present holder of the honours of Hurley had succeeded his grandfather. This personage had substantiated the family traditions by quarrelling with his only son; and, when the latter had flung him a final defiance by wedding a City heiress, had taken a characteristic revenge. He had laid waste the fair lands he could not alienate. For miles the father's anger had written itself hideously upon hill and plain.

According to custom, the pious founders of the Priory had chosen its site with an eye to beauty as well as material convenience. The woods that sheltered their game, the rivers and ponds that held their fish, the fields that grew their corn, the meadows that fattened their cattle, were all as goodly to the eye as they were prodigal in return. In the space of half a year the whole landscape was mutilated. Every tree was levelled. It was a spite that absorbed an incalculable sum. In his frenzy, Lord Wroth had not paused to make bargains for his timber, and the available labour of the countryside was employed at the work of destruction from dawn to sunset. Vast battalions of trees lay where they were felled; dealers were paid to remove the encumbrance from park and avenue.

And in the end my lord was robbed of the satisfaction of his illegal revenge. He had been in mad haste to strike, but there was a power swifter still than his wrath. The heir's seeming apathy was one morning explained by a business-like courier from the City. Young Wroth was dead of a pernicious fever and had not even heard of his father's reprisals. The city merchant took the opportunity to hint something of his intention to bring an action in the interest of the minor, his infant grandson, but this intention was never carried through.

Whether from the effects of thwarted rage or of belated remorse, whether prematurely worn out by the violent passions that had rent him all his life, it would be hard to say, but Lord Wroth was that day seized with a stroke—the country folk called it a judgment. For twenty years of ever-deepening imbecility he lived on in the midst of the desolation he had wrought—a body without a soul, dead yet alive, a fairly apt example for the superstitious of the curse of Hurley—once Lady's Grace.

When he passed at last, unmourned and unhonoured, a truthful chronicler might well have described him as the most notorious of a notorious line, had not his young successor bidden fair to outdo him. From the spring of 1813 to the fall of 1816, George, fifth Lord Wroth, had reigned at Hurley; and, short as the time was for the distinction, he was already known from end to end of the country as Mad Wroth.

CHAPTER I

"SURELY," said Juliana, rousing herself from a mood of deep reflectiveness, "we are being driven strangely fast—wildly!"

Mrs. Panton, the Contessa's woman, spread out in all her good-humoured volume on the back seat of the travelling chaise, shook her head. Ruddy, even in the white light of the moon, her countenance bore that expression of cheerfulness which, as a rule, preluded her most pessimistic utterances:

"Drunk, my lady!" she remarked in an unctuous contralto. "As soon as I laid eyes on the rascal, at the Wells yonder, says I to myself: 'He'll break his neck, and ours too.'" She heaved a sigh that more nearly expressed satisfaction than dismay. "Says I to myself, when your ladyship would leave Annibale in London, and start unprotected on this wildgoose chase: 'This will bring disaster on two helpless females . . .'"

"Why, Panton," said the lady, and her tone was good-naturedly indifferent, "did you not yourself tell me that Annibale was more trouble to you than help in this country?"

"I did, my lady, I did. I spent my time, from the hour we set foot at Dover, in getting him out of scrapes and teaching him our English ways. But a man's a man on a lonely road at night, since your ladyship must go on trapezing after that good-for-nothing baggage, who will give your ladyship no gratitude—if indeed we

ever live to get to her; which I much doubt, my lady, with that rascal driving us this rate. There will be two corpses at the end of our night's work, not to speak of the post-boy."

"Well, we must resign ourselves, I suppose," said her mistress placidly. "If the fellow is drunk, he will scarcely attend to any remonstrance."

Even as she spoke, the chaise gave a lurch, bounding in and out of a rut. On either side the hedgerows were flying by with nightmare velocity. They turned a corner, and so sharply that Juliana could not repress a cry. The attendant shook her head again.

"What did I say, my lady? Well, thanks be to the Almighty, I finished your ladyship's purple mantle last night; I am quite prepared."

"But I am not," said Juliana, with a laugh that matched her cry: low-toned and sweet it was, the most controlled expression of feeling conceivable. "I am by no means prepared, Panton. And I think we must really try to put a stop to this."

She dropped the window and thrust forth her head. They were going against the wind, and it was a stormy September night. The gust engulfed itself in the folds of her travelling hood; then tore it from her head. The masses of her black hair were seized as by invisible hands, soft yet irresistible, and she was buffeted with her own silken tresses. The leaves whirled past her, torn from writhing branches. The moon, in full glory, sailed high amid seas of white wrack that seemed to part before her as the foam parts in drift and flying scud before the forging ship.

Juliana allowed a few moments to pass before carrying out her purpose. The untamable spirit of the night, the madness of this rushing pace, was calling to something within herself—something hitherto unknown

—reckless. She could see the post-boy riding the near horse as a jockey his racer, elbows, knees, and heels working; she could hear the snorts of the over-driven creatures and, from inside the coach, her woman ever more jubilantly chant approaching and inevitable dissolution.

Then, suddenly, without any apparent reason, the postilion drew rein, whooped, and cracked his whip. The horses, checked in their headlong stride, plunged and reared. There was an answering shout from the side of the road, the clang and the groan of opening gates. With fresh lashing, curses, tugs, the greys were pulled sideways; for an instant the chaise was balanced on two wheels.

"Try to fall on me, my lady," intoned Panton.

An ominous grating against the stone post, and the rocking chaise righted itself; the bewildered cattle stretched again into their stride, labouring, it seemed, upon an uphill way. And now behind them the gates groaned and clanged to again. Juliana sank back into her seat.

"We are off the high road," she said. "What is the meaning of this?"

Mrs. Panton folded her plump hands.

"It is a *gate-a-pence.* It means that we shall both get our throats cut for the sake of your ladyship's jewels. When I first set eyes on that ruffian: 'Murderer,' said I to myself."

"Order him to stop," said Juliana.

Mrs. Panton protruded her jovial countenance on her side:

"Hi, fellow! Hi, man! Hi, scoundrel!" she called. "Pull up this moment!"

The post-boy looked over his shoulder, grinning (as she subsequently told her mistress) "like Satan himself."

"Hooroo!" cried he, "there's Tenebry at Hurley-Burley to-night!"

"My lady," said Panton, as she drew her head in, "it's worse than drink and thieves. It's stark, staring lunacy . . . and the Lord only knows what he means to do with us!"

"Tenebrae!" repeated Juliana wonderingly.

A vision out of the land which was her home painted itself upon the night. Cypress trees, black about a white church, great doors open, cool gloom within, incense-weighted, restful against the blazing sunshine. In her ears came the echo of a sad chant rising and falling. . . . But "Tenebrae at Hurley-Burley!" it was like the freak of a dream.

Mistress and maid looked at each other. In one thing were they matched. The thrill in Juliana Mordante's voice held more excitement than fear; and Mrs. Panton, repeating in murmurs to herself that she was quite prepared, had a mantling cheek and a sparkling eye.

"Never fear, my lady," she cried aloud. "I could fire one of those pistols in the case, if really brought to it, a deal better than Annibale himself."

"Perhaps it would not be amiss to get them out," said Juliana.

Her hands were steady as she drew the polished mahogany box from under the seat. The unsuspected element in her which the voice of the wind had called from slumber to-night was growing stronger, filling her soul. She was twenty-four, and this was the first adventure of her life.

Instead of hedgerows there now ran by them on either side a great waste. It lay ashen in the moonlight; and as the horses strained to the top of the hill and their fallen pace broke into gallop once again,

Juliana could see that this barren land spread away, sinking and rising again to the horizon, for miles, it seemed, without a single tree. "It is some vast moor," she told herself. And then was surprised to behold a wide shine of water running snake-like and cutting the land in twain—for where river flows, wood should thrive. Presently she discovered that what she had taken for low bushes, darting past, at regular intervals, on each side of the rough grass-grown road, were the stumps of once mighty trees. By and by these ruins of a noble avenue gave place to wholesale slaughtered woods. Here the remains of timber which apparently had not been found worth the removal lay rotting on the ground. It was like a deserted battlefield, where the dead were still stretched as they had fallen. A melancholy seized on her heart: into what story of recklessness and desolation was she being thus strangely rushed?

The carriage crested another hill; and then, at a turn of the road, a mass of building upreared its bulk, black against the pale sky, pierced here and there with a yellow glare, from what seemed extraordinarily high windows.

"Look out this way, my lady, look!" cried Panton. "This is some great castle."

"No," said Juliana in astonishment, "surely it is a church!"

The light from within revealed indeed the noble yet delicate outlines of lancet windows. Buttresses and pinnacles; a finial and a gargoyle here and there; broken pillars of a ruined cloister; the angle of a high-pitched roof and the fretwork of upspringing spires took shape before her eyes in the mystery of the moonlight.

"Tenebrae at Hurley-Burley . . .!" She had read tales of mystic experiences where lonely travellers

were initiated to ghostly ceremonials, the guests of unquiet spirits engaged in repeating, within ruined walls, the glories, the follies, or the crimes of the dead past. But there was reality in the shouts with which their mad post-boy now rent the night; reality in the roaring breath of the horses, the steaming of their flanks in the chill air; in Mrs. Panton's solid presence, in her ever rounder eyes of astonishment; in the jar with which the coach was suddenly pulled up.

For a moment silence enveloped them, complete but for the rushing of the wind and the panting of the horses. Now one of them shuddered and the harness rattled. Then out of the church arose a stave of song followed by a chorus that rang out jovially ribald.

The post-boy raised a fresh howl and again cracked his whip. There was an answering shout from within, a burst of laughter; and then unreality began again. Slowly, groaning as they went, the great doors, under the carven canopy of the church porch, began to roll back; a vault of light, orange, lurid, opened between them. The driver urged his horses, lashed them through the once consecrated portal into the church itself. It was almost as if the dumb creatures felt the dread of the sacrilege. Snorting, plunging, their hoofs beating resistance on the stone flags, they were yet forced forward; the clatter of their passage, the postilion's drunken shouts, echoed and re-echoed from roof and aisle.

With wild laughter, yells, and maniac gesture, figures in grey monks' robes rushed to the side of the coach. For a moment to the bewildered occupants all was whirl and noise, flame and darkness. Then they had a vision of the church as the chaise rocked up the nave. Save for here an ancient monument, there a carven figure mutilated in a niche, the place was

denuded. Torches, stuck in the long rows of pillars, filled the air with a resinous smoke that hung in wreaths, thickly red below, but silver-tinted by the moonrays where they circled high into the clerestory.

Within a few feet of the altar-steps the travellers' halting and dangerous progress was arrested. One of the horses, blowing deep breaths, as if scenting some new fantastic terror, suddenly refused to advance further; and when mercilessly pushed, snorted, screamed, reared madly and fell, dragging his companion down with him.

The turmoil that ensued was beyond description. Juliana's ears rang with the sounds of laughter and curses, the clatter of struggling horses on the stone floor. Before her eyes flitted the grey-robed figures, leaping, mocking, lurching against each other, with the aimless malice, it seemed, of demons at play. Under the cowls curious eyes were peering at her. No dream could have been more senseless, no delirium more evil. Suddenly, above the chaos, a voice rose clear, imperative:

"Cut the traces!"

The carriage door was wrenched open and Juliana found herself drawn forth in the grasp of compelling hands. For a moment or two she stood, unable to connect her thoughts; then the most immediately irritating factor in the confusion about seemed to her to be Panton's screams—Panton, who had emerged with extreme briskness in the wake of her mistress, yet deemed it incumbent on her to make the loudest protest in her power.

"Hush!" said Juliana sternly. "This, after all your boasts, Panton!"

"My lady," said Mrs. Panton, waving the pistols in vague directions; "my lady, for death I was prepared, but not for hell."

The habit of self-control, the hardest, perhaps, to acquire, is of its essence the most faithful at the test. If life had held few joyous emotions for the Contessa Mordante, it had taught her discipline. She looked calmly enough on the scene—the piteous struggle of the foundered animals; her woman's empurpled countenance; the post-boy, sobered by the catastrophe, and cursing as he busied himself with the traces; the incredible brotherhood of monks. . . . Some eight men these, all apparently more or less young, all evidently more or less drunk.

Apart from the rest, however, on the sanctuary steps, stood one with an air of authority. He was clad like the others, but his cowl was flung back and revealed a young head of classic shape, close-covered with chestnut curls, and a pale, scornful face of singular beauty. Scarcely above middle height, he yet dominated. She knew instinctively that his were the hands that had drawn her from the coach, his the voice that had rung out sanely through the general madness. To him she turned:

"Perhaps you, sir, can explain this outrage?"

She dropped her hood as she spoke. At sight of her countenance the young man fell back a step, as if blasted with astonishment, and then stood staring at her with a kind of intensity, gloomy and yet afire. His eyes held hers and stillness seemed to set about them as their gaze commingled.

Then at Juliana's elbow came a cry of disgusted amazement. A pink, insolent, boyish face was thrust close:

"Whom have we here?—By jingo, it is the wrong woman!"

"The wrong woman!" echoed another voice. "Trapped the wrong bird, eh? Gad, look at Martindale's face—the richest joke!"

"Tom, Dick, Harry, whatever your rascally name is, you'll smart for this!" cried the first, turning to the post-boy and exploding with fury.

"The wrong bird, by George!" repeated the second, in a fresh gust of merriment. "Madam, you must excuse me, but as I'm a sinner, here's a noble prank of fate!" Within the loose habit his slim figure was doubled up with spasms of mirth.

Juliana's glance strayed from one grinning face to another. The mock friars were gathering oppressively about her; she caught broken phrases that fell ominously. —"Never complain, Martindale, the bird will do well enough."—"Gad, lay a trap for a hedgesparrow and take a bit of plumage like this . . . a swan, a swan, a bird of paradise!"—"What's Martindale got to do with her now, eh, Scaife? This is a prize dropped from heaven and let the best win!"

The postilion, his fingers trembling over the buckles they strove to disentangle, raised his whine:

"I did as I was bid. I picked the lady up where you ordered me. Did you not warn me never to mind if she screamed? And——"

"Never mind, you'll have double pay for it, lad," answered the laughing monk.

Here Panton's screams cut the air anew. She struck, with the muzzle of her pistol, at an arm that was reaching for her mistress's waist.

Juliana flashed a look towards the young man who had helped her and who had seemed to hold some kind of authority. This look commanded rather than appealed. He started from his rapt contemplation, and came down the steps of the sanctuary.

"Back, you fools!" he ordered.

His tone was so harsh, the scowl which accompanied the words was so blighting, that the crew seemed to

melt away before him; then, turning to Juliana, he made a bow of the most complete courtesy and held out his hand.

"Madam," he said, "I am Lord Wroth, and master here. May I have the honour of conducting you to a seat? These wretches have alarmed you."

Once more the two remained motionless, measuring each other. After a few seconds, moved by an unaccountable impulse of confidence, Juliana laid her hand in his and, without a word, suffered him to lead her where he would. He brought her up the steps, to the sanctuary daïs, to the head of the altar-table, where stood a high-backed chair pushed on one side as if its last occupant had hastily risen. Here she let herself sink down, for her knees were giving way.

"A glass of wine," said he, his eyes still fixed in singular intensity upon her. It was a glance fiercely eager, yet so reverential, so deeply earnest, that it could hold no offence. He stretched for a decanter that shone purple beneath the light of the many silver candelabra decking the table, and, as he did so, his voluminous sleeve caught in a goblet, which fell with a clang of breaking glass, while a thin stream of red ran swiftly across the stone. With a smothered oath he flung the encumbering robe from him and stood in full evening dress, exquisite in all detail of ruffle, high stock, miraculous waistcoat and engraved button, giving a first impression of dandyism, instantly corrected by the virile lines of the face, by its extraordinary combination of gloom, passion, and inspiration.

"You are pale, madam," he said, bending over her; and this time there was a softness, almost a huskiness in his voice, of which Juliana vaguely felt the attractiveness. The thought flashed into her mind that such a voice, in accents of love, would be irresistible; then,

amazed at herself, feeling indeed as if she must be in some fevered dream in which she could not control her mind, she stretched out her hand for the wine which was respectfully yet urgently proffered. As she sipped she heard the clarion tones raised again:

"Fools, did I not say—cut the traces? You'll never get them unbuckled now! Vane, ring the bell; we must have help from the yard. Scaife, give the woman a chair. You, Martindale and Devisme, what dolts you fellows be! You tried to play your joke on me—and a d—d bad one, too! And it's fizzled out, and you're shown a set of pretty asses. There's nothing to laugh at!—Madam," he went on, turning back to Juliana, "my stables are at your disposal. You can proceed on your journey when you have rested and refreshed yourself. For the moment, believe me, I am honoured to find myself your host."

His orders were followed, as they rang out, by a marked commotion among the mock friars. One started running towards the end of the church. Two youths who had been plaguing Mrs. Panton, harmlessly enough, by alternately simulating terror at her pistols, and endeavouring to encircle her substantial waist in fond embrace, proceeded with burlesque graces to conduct her up the steps and establish her at the further end of the table.

"My lord," cried the postilion, raising a scarlet countenance from the harness with which he was still struggling, "you will have to pay for this night's work!"

A couple of the more sober of the fraternity hustled him on one side, and the straps fell apart. There followed an echoing scramble as, relieved from the weight of the chaise, the ill-treated horses were able at last to rise. The shout of triumph which attended this success was drowned by the note of a deep-toned bell

booming above into the night, falling and withdrawing and breaking forth again, like waves upon the strand.

Juliana laid down the glass; the glow of the wine, as it ran through her frame, roused again the spirit which had so unexpectedly answered to the wild night's adventure. But at the clang of the bell a different mood came upon her; it was like a warning, a message from the past, a cry from this house, whilom of God, against those who were desecrating its memories. She turned a grave look upon him who had called himself her host, and the thought struck her that, if the great Angel of Evil were to take shape on earth, he might well wear even such a countenance of sinister beauty and despair, of scorn and power.

The last breaker of sound struck and ebbed away. It was echoed by a long dismal howl, unlike anything that she had ever heard before; and, though she argued with herself that it could be but the wail of some chained hound, she felt her hair arise with a sense of inexplicable terror.

From the left aisle—from what had once been a side chapel with an exit upon the cloisters—came the rumbling of heavy doors upon their hinges and the clattering of a *posse* of stablemen, obedient to the summons of the bell. Lord Wroth left Juliana's side and went to the head of the steps. One of the men came forward and his master spoke to him in a low voice. The fellow touched his forelock and withdrew. In an incredibly short space of time horses and chaise had vanished.

As the doors closed with reverberating clangour, the mummers streamed up into the sanctuary once more and clustered together at the end of the table. With the disappearance of the tangible evidence of her arrival in these fantastic surroundings, Juliana could hardly persuade herself once again that she was not in a dream.

Yet must she know herself in a reality of peril. New libations were beginning. A few more bottles among the crew, and how would it stand with her? Panton, half-hysterical with rage and fear, could prove of no protection; and, as for her host, that gaze of his, ever upon her, began to enter her soul as something infinitely troubling.

Though she sat in outward calm, like a queen upon her throne, the inward tension grew well-nigh unbearable. In the end she almost welcomed the danger she had foreseen. It came suddenly. It passed swiftly, all in accord with the strangeness of the whole adventure.

Through what had been the sacristy in days of old two servants in livery, bearing flagons, entered the sanctuary, followed by a white-headed butler, carrying a large cup carefully in both hands. The old man advanced slowly, and, casting an anxious, almost agonised, glance upon her, bowed to his master. Then she saw that what the trembling hands clasped was a human skull, heavily mounted in silver.

"My lord——" he quavered, his eyes—honest eyes they were—still fixed on herself. Wroth turned sharply, and his face darkened with a frown that once more reminded Juliana of her fanciful simile.

"What is this?"

"My lord—you, or at least Mr. Martindale, gave orders that—when the bell should ring——"

A great shout interrupted him, echoed and re-echoed:

"Aye, bravo! Yes, yes, the toast, the toast of Hurley!"

All sprang to their feet. One of the footmen, as if going through a well-known ceremonial, began to pour the contents of a flagon into the sinister cup. At the first lap of the wine into the bowl Mrs. Panton's "hell" broke loose. Juliana had a troubled impression of

struggling figures, arms extended, oaths, laughter, outcries.

"The first to drink the toast to have the first chance! The old Hurley-Burley rules—first draught, first chance!" cried the tallest monk fiercely, elbowing right and left as he forced his way to the front. The butler, hustled, let the wine fall in splashes over the cup. Lord Wroth became livid.

"Back!" he cried in a voice that once again struck instant silence. Then, into the lull, a figure came running among them, and sprang upon the table itself. It was the post-boy, sobered as to the fumes of drink, but now drunk with anger.

"I'll tell you what, my lord and gentlemen. It's a very fine joke for you, but it's scurvy treatment of a poor lad! You rich folk play your pranks with the poor, make a lad tipsy, toss him a guinea to drive crooked instead of straight, and it's none of you care if it's death and ruin to him. I've been used shameful; and the grey's knees are broke, my lord——"

In the hush the hollow sound of his own voice became unexpectedly alarming to him. His high fury fell suddenly; he proceeded in a whine:

"The grey's knees are broke. Blue Bess's knees are broke cruel on your wicked church slabs! She'll never be fit for the road again; she might as well be shot. And I'm done for! It was the rum; my head can't stand it. When I bargained to drive the lady to your tenebry I——"

An outbreak of jeers and laughter swallowed up his plaint. A groan escaped from the old butler. Pandemonium broke out again, furiously. One seized the cup; it was snatched by another. Floating words of mysteriously ugly significance fell upon Juliana's ear. "The toast!" "Martindale's noble joke!" And

then, from lip to lip, the cry: "The Queen of the revels—the unknown beauty; and a beauty she is!"

Mrs. Panton shrieked lamentably and, seized with inspiration, fired off one of her pistols in the air. This brought a new pause while vault and arch took up the report and threw it, ever fainter, from side to side; then again came the roar of tipsy laughter, and again Juliana's whole frame shivered at the sound of an eerie howl uplifted, with its inexplicable note of savage melancholy, from the far depths of the church.

Protected on the one side by the table, on the other by Lord Wroth, she forced herself to continued immobility, lest a single gesture betray her to insult. But the narrow line that divides the two stages of inebriation—where excitement passes to insanity—had been overstepped, and the ascendancy which up to now had sufficed to act as restraint proved powerless. The revellers, as they pressed round the table, had ceased to be merely inanely frolicsome; they were becoming dangerous. Two, more openly audacious, were easily thrust aside. A third caught the back of her chair and swung it from the table. It was he who had raised the cry: "First draught, first chance!"

"For the Lord's sake, Mr. Devisme, sir!" wailed the old servant.

But Devisme brandished the death's-head cup, which he had at last secured, one arm across the top of Juliana's chair.

"First toast—I have it—she is mine!" he bellowed, and brought the draught to his lips.

Instantly the host's voice resounded:

"Devisme, I charge you!"

"Wroth," retorted the other, laughing wildly, "a rule's a rule. By all the rules of this ancient brotherhood the toast is mine!"

He spoke with a dreadful clearness—one of those whom wine maddens rather than besots. "In nomine Patris," he intoned. The rest of the blasphemy was lost in uproar.

Juliana felt the menace of his huge strength encompass her. He had drawn ever closer—had well-nigh seated himself on the arm of her chair. And suddenly she became aware that her sole protector had left her side. Terror came upon her. In her state of loathing watchfulness every movement of the man who had so insolently claimed her became acute to her senses; she could hear the greedy lapping in his throat as the wine ran down. When that huge cup was emptied he would turn to her. . . . But now the voice that she had already learned to distinguish among all the others reached her ear, as it were from some hollow distance.

"Wild beasts are you. . . . Then wild beasts shall teach you manners!"

Even upon the word there came a snarl—sharp as the cut of a whip—and, for the third time, the savage cry: this was followed by a clank as of chains falling upon the pavement, and the voice of Wroth again:

"Up, Lupus, up!"

Amid the near confusion someone called out:

"Damnation, it's the wolf!"

Others, aghast, echoed the words:

"The wolf!"

There was a protesting outcry, then a hush; and, in the hush, from out the distant darkness, another sound that filled the whole church with threat — a low-muttered growl, as deep as it was sly.

Devisme, leaning across her, flung the emptied skull on the table, and in suddenly altered accents exclaimed:

"The madman never means to loose the beasts upon us!"

The post-boy, who had been consoling himself with a bottle, gulped with terror, jumped down the steps, and set off running; and, as he ran, he cried: "The wolf, the bear! The Hurley beasts! The nags smelt them; the nags knew!"

A sort of hunting call, fierce, jubilant, drawing ever nearer, pierced the tumult:

"At them, Lupus, at them! On, Professor Brown! Hoy, my fine fellows, at them! At them, my good boys! Hoy, hoy, hoy!"

The friars parted, fell away. Juliana saw their faces, some in the shadow of their hoods, some uncovered, all blasted with the same fear—a fear the more ugly that it was stamped on the vacuity of drunkenness. But she saw, scarcely marking. The one vision of which she was acutely conscious was that of Wroth's figure, leaping up the church in fantastic bounds and jerks, holding a chain in either hand; he was alternately pulled forward by the rush of a wolf and dragged back by the halting, lolloping gait of a Pyrenean bear, upreared, monstrous tall. She saw the opal glare of the wolf's eyes, the open, straining jaws, the bristling ruff; the small red eyes of the bear, its enormous head with its expression of sly humour—the creature that hugs its prey to death. She had at the same time a flashing impression of Panton's face, paralysed with terror, devoid of all expression, like a doll's. And in but another instant, it seemed to her, the extraordinary group was upon them.

The brotherhood scattered. The footmen dropped tray and bottles and ran as hastily as the post-boy. There was hardly a sound under the vaulted roof beyond Wroth's own diabolic hunting cries, the breath of the

wolf, the grunts of the bear. The butler alone stood his ground; again he uttered rebuke:

"My lord, my lord! . . . Master George, think of the ladies!"

"Yes, Lupus, it may be fresh meat to-night for you! A spring at the throat, my game boy—ah, and your nice white teeth crunching through it! Hoy, Professor, you're slow, Monsieur, but you are sure, as I know. You'll teach them how to embrace, won't you? How close, how sure, how lovingly! 'Tis lovers they would be—eh? You'll show them how, Monsieur Lebrun, Emeritus Professor, at the Academy of Hugs! Hoy, Lupus! hoy, Professor! What, gone? What, gentlemen—on the scuttle? What, not one of you ready for a fall with brother bear, or a snap with brother wolf? Wild beasts did I call you? Not even wild beasts: rats, swine! Friars of Hurley-Burley—you? Never! Pot-house bucks . . . no comrades for my revels——"

The words flowed from the young man's lips with extraordinary passion. When he reached the altar steps he suddenly released the bear and made a gesture as if to cast the wolf's chain from him, and the silent spring of the creature, its open and slavering jaws so close to her, brought for the first time a sensation of faintness upon Juliana. There was a rush of feet upon the flags; a medley of oaths, some inanity of laughter, cries, muffled or angry. The heavy doors of the church were slammed in quick succession, and the dull noise again woke all the distant echoes of roof and vault.

"Routed?" chanted Wroth, still in the same high key of exultation. "Fled—not a rat, not a grunter left!"

He stood a moment motionless, only his gaze wandered. Then he flung back his head and laughed, loud and long; and fantastically the stones gave back his laughter.

The bear lolloped up to the table, making odd little sounds of pleasure to himself; and Mrs. Panton started from her palsy to find a hairy muzzle gently but firmly pushing against her arm. Bruin's intentions were harmless enough; he was but aiming at the sweet cake which one of her officious attendants had placed within her reach. But Mrs. Panton found this added terror more than her boasted stoic preparedness could endure. Shrieking, she scuttled out of the chair with an agility surprising for her size, and cast herself upon the old servant's breast.

The latter had taken his master's post beside Juliana's chair, and stood, it seemed, on guard there —a strange figure of venerable respectability in that picture of riot. He patted Mrs. Panton soothingly on the arm.

"Don't be alarmed, ma'am, nor you either, my lady. The poor bear will hurt nobody; he's as harmless as a child—if people only knew it."

"Take the woman away, Bertram."

Wroth, fallen into stillness, stood gazing at Juliana, one foot on the crouching body of the wolf, as it lay extended, panting on the marble mosaic. Juliana thought of some bronze figure she remembered in the market-place of an old Italian town—a St. Michael with the demon at his feet, no fallen angel this time! One of the most singular things of this singular evening, it seemed to her afterwards, was her own power of detachment from the physical terrors about her. Never had her mind worked more vividly.

"My good woman," said Lord Wroth, addressing Mrs. Panton very kindly, "the butler will take you where you can rest and recover yourself, before resuming the journey.—See, Bertram, that she has supper and a glass of wine in quiet."

There was a touch of humour in the last words. Mrs. Panton sketched a curtsey. The born servant is quick to recognise the born master. He might be a mad gentleman, but he was a true lord, as she never failed, afterwards, to remark when she reached this point in the recounting of her thrilling experience.

"Or a tumbler of punch," added my lord, with a swift glance; her visage still wore the mottled pallor of the naturally rubicund. She curtseyed again. The prescription was acceptable; Mr. Bertram was the living image of all proper decorum; and she was burning with curiosity. If anyone could make a man talk, while holding her own tongue, it was she. And with just a sip! . . . But Panton was sturdy in her allegiance.

"My mistress——" she hesitated, "my lady——?"

Her lady sat so strangely still. Poor lamb, should Panton abandon her, for safety and punch? And to wolves indeed! She looked at Wroth's face—it was dark with a sudden frown; at the wolf, beneath his foot. She shuddered . . . and behind her, the bear was munching and grumbling.

"For myself," she cried valiantly, "I do not care—I cannot leave my mistress."

Here Bertram intervened.

"My lord, indeed, there have been evil doings to-night! A lady—a true lady, my lord! For God's sake, my lady, how did you come here? My lady, this is no place for such as you."

"Bertram!" the word broke from Wroth with uncontrollable passion. But Bertram was unafraid; his old blue eyes were only sad as he looked back at the fierce convulsed face. He shook his grey head.

"My lady," he urged, "indeed this is no place for you. His lordship——" He paused. "His lordship will make amends, he will provide you with carriage

and horses.—The house of Wroth has had shame enough, my lord, but never such as this."

"Bertram," repeated his master—the fury had passed from his countenance suddenly and his tone was friendly —"you are an old fool; the carriage is already ordered and the lady will be leaving within the hour. Meanwhile, entertain you the servant. I entertain my guest. You permit it, madam?"

He turned to Juliana and the last phrase was spoken in accents which both compelled and pleaded. The fire of his eye was upon her. Juliana inclined her head. At this he bowed and, turning, flung a gesture of command. It was a wordless reception of her inexplicable acquiescence, yet Juliana saw in it a triumph higher than if it had been shouted. Their eyes met and she was blind to her woman's further demur, blind to the butler's covert signs—shaking disclaimers of further responsibility, wordless prognostication of mischief.

The retreating steps, dropping on the flags like water in some rocky cavern, drew to ever greater distance; and, at last, the closing of the sacristy door set its hollow stamp upon the silence, a seal, as it were, upon their solitude—something solemn, final, irrevocable.

CHAPTER II

After a pause Wroth spoke; impetuously the words fell from him. There were cadences in his voice which pierced to Juliana's senses like sudden music.

"That old man . . . he held me in his arms when I was born. He loves me, like a father at once and a slave. But you, you know me better than he does. What, the very beasts would respect you, and I should not! Lupus"—he cried, caught the creature by the collar and dragged him to where she sat—"Lupus, down before the lady!"

The savage thing snarled and writhed in his grip; but at Juliana's feet, whether cowed by his voice and hand, whether moved by some fear of her impassive presence, it drooped its fierce head and fawned and slavered.

"Una!" he called exultantly, "Una! did I not know?"

She slowly raised her eyes from where they rested upon the panting wolf.

"Ah, yes," he exclaimed as if in answer to something she had said, "the hour is short for us two together. Shall it not give us what it can?—Back to the kennel, Lupus!"

With a turn of the wrist he wrenched his strange favourite away. In all things he moved with the impulsiveness of a boy: she thought he must be very young, though his face told the tale of so much life.

"And you, Monsieur—come, Professor, to your hutch!" He hustled the creatures as a schoolboy might his comrades; roughly, good-humouredly, with as little fear.

Wonder had left her. She watched him down the altar daïs and across the nave, cuffing and pushing the bear, the wolf straining as before. She saw the odd trio pass again in fantastic springs through the torch-lit spaces, to be engulfed at length by the blackness of the aisle; heard again a clank of chains; then running steps, light as Mercury's. He was by her side once more.

"Now," he said, "now!"

When he lifted his voice, in command or in anger, it was sonorous and clear as a bell; when he spoke to her it was lowered, it had a sort of tender huskiness which each time made her heart beat quickly. He took one of the heavy chairs—carved with fruit and flower and beast they were, with holy symbols on the back of them; therein had successions of earnest monks rested and prayed so many years ago—drew it close to her and sat down.

"Will you give me your hand?" he said, low as a whisper.

"No," said Juliana, in grave and gentle tone.

This was almost the first word she had spoken, and it was, No.

Like lightning came the question:

"You are not free?"

And again she answered:

"No."

If she had struck him with a dagger, a swifter pallor could hardly have spread upon his face.

"I knew it was impossible," he cried. "Before God, I knew it! Yet it might have been!"

He pushed back his chair, grating against the

marble, put an elbow on the table, propped his head upon his hand and seemed to steep himself in contemplation. The thick chestnut curls clustered over his fingers: she noticed that the line of his forehead was noble and broad; that the eyebrows, running close together and low, nearly met, to rise with an outer sweep at each temple; that the eyes, set wide apart, full of fire, alternately restless and brooding, were rufous in colour like the hair, with pupils that dilated and contracted quickly according to the mood. Now these eyes looked dark and soft, now light and cruel. For the rest of the countenance, it recalled that of some marble god such as Italy has treasured from those past days when beauty was held divine. "It is the Hermes of the Vatican," she said to herself, suddenly scornful of a world grown ugly.

Afterwards she marvelled to think of the many similes she had sought in order to express this man to herself: similes from the earth-world and the spirit-world, from stone and bronze—while yet it was the most individual personality she had ever met, the most alive.

From gloomy that it was, his gaze gradually became illuminated; in it delight succeeded fierceness; it began to caress her, to feast upon her; seemed to be clothing her in radiance, in colour, in beauty, as the artist clothes his ideal.

Juliana's head was a little uplifted. She sat with each arm flung loosely upon the supports of the Abbot's chair. It was a characteristic attitude, restful yet restrained; her whole presence was both peaceful and strong. The folds of a black travelling dress clung to the long lines of her figure and threw into strong relief the magnolia pallor of face and bare throat. The dark amethyst hue of her travelling cloak gave a rich touch

of colour to this warm, white beauty. Her hair, loosened, hung on each side of her forehead like brooding wings, dark as night. It was no English type. Some fiercer sun had nurtured this woman, given richness to the ivory skin, given the ripeness to her young loveliness, drawn the full yet pure outline of face and figure, shadowed those eyes. When Shakespeare wrote of "Violets dim, sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes," he had the hue of the faint wood-violet of English copses in his mind as much as its fragrance. Yet, surely, it must have been after an Italian journey that he drew the simile: few countrywomen of his own could have looked upon him through those delicate shadows that are as far removed from ill-health as they are close to beauty. Juliana's eyes seemed softly dark in their dark setting. And it was with surprise that he, who continued to gaze at her as if to impregnate himself with the joy of her, presently perceived that they were of a deep pansy purple.

In the pause which had fallen about them he saw the wings of her nostrils begin to quiver with quickened breath. Her lips parted. They were full lips and passionate, yet innocent—child's lips. But the eyes were those of a grave and wise woman. Uncontrollable words broke from him:

"Even in my dreams," he cried, "you were never so beautiful! Oh, this glorious hour! After all, the hour is the life. I am unspeakably happy. This is delight unspeakable!" His point of view changed quickly. Her attraction was not merely physical, far from it. "There is not another woman in the world who would have known that she could trust me. You knew. You, the one woman who could have made me the man I could be." Sorrow struggled with the ecstasy on his face. "The one woman," he repeated. "Out of

the night you have come to me. Out into the night you will go from me. And that will be the end."

She leaned forward—it seemed the first time she had moved, almost, since she had first sat in that chair—and placed her clasped hands upon the table. The fingers were long and taper, they were beautiful hands. The wedding ring gleamed: as he marked it he sighed. Then pleasure mounted again:

"I have always thought a dark beauty was at her best in black."

It was an exclamation that in so young a man would have betrayed many things to one versed in the world's ways. Juliana was not so versed; yet, for the first time, his out-speaking brought offence. Something of the curious spell was broken. What was she doing here? She compressed the lips that had been so softly opened. Her brows drew together into what was hardly a frown, a mere reflection of trouble. By some abnormal intuition, it seemed, her very thought was bare to him. The next instant, he knew, she would draw her cloak about her and rise, and his hour would drop away from him, incomplete.

"No!" he cried imploringly. "No, before heaven, nothing that is base in me can live in your presence. I am what you would have me. Listen," he cried, and leaned forward. By her change of attitude she had brought herself closer. As he spoke now, his breath fanned a loosened tendril of her hair. She could see, for his gaze compelled hers, the alternate dilation and contraction of the pupils of his red-brown eyes. By shifting his hand he could have touched her; by a single movement he could have clasped her to him. But the momentary doubt had left her. As he had said: she knew.—It was only their spirits that would meet.

"All my life, all my life, I have felt that you were somewhere—I have longed for you." Thus he plunged into his strange confession. "And at the moment when, from want of you, I have touched my lowest depth, you have come to me! As you heard, there was Tenebrae at the Abbey to-night. Do you know what that means? Do angels know what takes place in hell? This is our latter-day Medmenham. We must carouse, and have comrades in our carouses. But the tavern is too common a meeting-place for such choice souls as we. We must sing our ribald songs within walls held sacred still in the memory of the countryside. We must blaspheme in the sanctuary of prayers. We must make a mock of brotherhood, of piety and sacred rules, in mimicry of holy friars of old. The more outrageous, the better the jest. Oh, we are gay dogs and witty, I and my boon companions—and I am the leader of them all! Such noble use do I make of life." Indescribable was the bitterness with which he spoke. "To-night this humorous brotherhood of ours conspired, it seems, to play a trick upon me, their worthy abbot. They have my leave to drink and gamble and fight to their heart's content. But I have lately set a new rule, madam, as monastic as any that old Ambrose ever enjoined: I said I would have no more women to my feasts. It used to be, as at Medmenham, that the revels at Hurley were not complete without a Queen of Folly —the fight for her, with cards or the foils or drinking feats, was the whet to enjoyment. Every friar, by the rule of the order, had the right to convene the queen of the hour. . . . Faugh! I declared I would have no more of this. You perceive, therefore, the point of the jest to-night? How you, madam, came to be concerned in it, instead of the creature, whoever she be, who was expected, is still obscure. . . . Drunk, indeed, and

besotted must have been the wretch who could mistake you for her. But I cannot kill him, because, through him, I have seen you."

There fell a pause. Juliana's face remained impassive, save in its ever-deepening look of sorrow. He took up his tale again, with lowered voice but quickened accents.

"They were hankering, apparently, for the old rites I had sickened of. We used to set the Queen of Folly in the Abbot's chair—where you now sit. She was toasted in the skull; and, according to our ritual, he who first emptied the cup had first chance for favour. Do you know," he went on after a silence, "that this is the skull of the great Abbot who loved the monastery and enriched it? The money he brought still jingles—a few pieces of it—in my coffers. He was buried under the high altar here, but his bones were dug up in old Harry's time and scattered—for my ancestor hated monks—but the skull was kept to make merry withal. . . . Do you know," he struck the stone slab, "that this was part of the high altar in the days when this hall was consecrate? People like to say that the first night the new master of the Abbey gathered his friends together and made banquet over it the altar-stone ran blood. We Wroths have made Tenebrae at Hurley ever since. Hurley, my Raby ancestor called it; it used to be Lady's Grace. . . . Hurley-Burley, the countryside has it, since my rule here began!"

Juliana sighed, her eyes wandered from his face down the aisle. Many of the torches had burnt themselves away, some flickered fitfully, but a few still flared. It was a strange picture of glow and gloom, with here gaping arches of blackness, there an empty niche painted by the flame; through the wreaths of

vapour that hung heavy and brooding, a bat hovered in noiseless flight—now lost, now scarlet-winged, a fiery semi-circle. It was like some evil thought, ever recurring. Half-way in the long columned space under the leaps of a torch that seemed to sob its life out, the placid recumbent figure on the tomb of the first Abbot kept springing into sight and fading—the praying hands, the upturned feet, calm image of rest and resignation in this desecrated place. The shadows and the lurid gleams shifted and intermingled. The air seemed full of sighs; and Juliana sighed again, as her look came back to the eager countenance of her host.

"So this was the sacred altar stone," she said, with one of her rare gestures, laying both hands flat upon it. "And this once a sacred place!"

Whenever she spoke, his ear was so delighted by the sound of her voice that he lingered upon its sweetness before considering the meaning of her words. It was grave and low; soft, as if for his ear alone; and yet it appeared to him to fill the church. He feasted on it and then flushed. Twice she had spoken in denial, once in rebuke. Passion trembled for a moment on his lip; then he saw how her purple eyes had widened sorrowfully, and how a cloud had gathered in them. Rarest of women—her frown was a shadow, her tears a mist!

"There shall never be Tenebrae in Hurley-Burley again," he cried suddenly. "It shall never be Hurley-Burley again. Since you have come to it, it is Lady's Grace once more. . . . Oh, how you look at me with your wonderful eyes! Your silence is the most beautiful thing in all the world: it is like the night sky, it holds the whole earth in peace. But when you speak the words are like stars upon the sky. Oh, if it had been

mine to have the promise of your silence, the fulfilment of your voice!"

He sprang to his feet and threw his arms aloft, paced the sanctuary twice or three times as in a sort of frenzy; then, returning, he fell upon his knees beside her chair, clasping the carven arm of it with both hands. So might the penitent fling himself at the feet of him who he believes can ease him of his burden. Even in such burning words might he lay bare the secrets of his soul with the bitter joy of self-revelation, pouring them out into the ear that helps merely by listening.

"From my very cradle," he said, "when I asked for bread I was given a stone. My mother disliked me as a child; as a man she hated and despised me. I was a sullen, fierce-tempered brat. You would not wonder if you knew my inheritance. My father spent most of his short life in devising plans to spite his father. The union of which I am the only fruit was the culmination of this filial policy. My grandfather died a living death of rage in this house, after laying waste the lands in revenge upon his son. Had you passed through it by daylight, you would have seen my goodly heritage: five thousand acres mutilated or left fallow—blighted by an old man's venom! My mother beat me before I could speak. What temper was I likely to have brought with me into the world? What patience, what self-control, was I likely to learn? I could have been taught with love. Oh, with love, I could have learned! But no one ever gave me that. Wasted childhood, wasted boyhood—worse than my murdered lands! At school, arrogant and morose, curbed by my masters, dreaded by my fellows, I hid my yearning for affection, for sympathy, for friendship, under the triple armour of pride, passion and reserve.

And always the beating of wings in my soul; the longing for some ecstasy, some perfection, ever dimly descried, ever denied! Always feeling here, and here," he struck his breast and brow with open palm, "the power, the insight, and flung back, flung ever upon the lowest! I was made for soaring, I was condemned to crawl. My masters I despised; none of their petty motives, their misused opportunities, their base aims were lost to me; and, beyond all their stores of book-knowledge, I, ignorant, had intuitions which carried me into regions they could not even guess at. Plenty there were who crawled before me because I was Wroth, a patrician, and certain some day to have wealth and power at my command. Never but once in those forlorn days did I meet a creature who had a fibre of real sympathy for me; an honest heart that loved me for what could be loved in me. And he, my school-fellow, was drowned."

His voice faltered. Juliana saw his face set into pallid darkness; his eyes were fixed as if looking upon the tragedy and ugliness of his life.

"Then came my manhood. . . . What of my manhood? What can I tell you of it? I talk of my wasted childhood, my wasted boyhood—what of those other years? Murdered, too, murdered! False friends, false loves, vain search, recurring disillusion, betrayal, perpetual disgust! Then wine to dull the cry of the heart—sport, sport to exalt the body, to tire it out. Look at me! I can swim miles, I can break a crown-piece between my fingers, I can thrash a coalheaver, I can put a ball through the heart of an ace at twenty paces—I can ride any horse that ever was foaled, and can tire out Angelo with the foils. I can win any woman in half an hour—now you are offended! No, do not turn your chaste eyes away. What have

women been to me? Less than the bubble of champagne, the moment's exhilaration. At the second sip already flat, stale. And always the same wine from a different glass! . . . I drank, I wearied, I loathed. And all the while that inner self crying out, wailing! All the while the exquisite vision, unattainable. All the while the impulse for the mountain heights, the pure air, the high solitude . . . and I on the dunghill, with the cattle about me—until to-night! To-night, now, I am soaring at last—with you! We spread our pinions. Do you not feel it, you too? Whatever your life has been you have kept heaven in your eyes. But you, too, on your solitary peak, must have wanted me. Our spirits are mates from the beginning. Oh, silent woman, beautiful—you with the dark hair and the deep wise eyes, we were born for each other. We were made for each other. Now our souls kiss!"

The veiled tenderness of his voice, through rise and fall and inflection, found wild echoes in Juliana's being. Had she been on the heights, lonely? Rather she had been caged: bars about her everywhere. And now for an hour she was free; for the first time she felt she too had wings and felt the wind beneath them; she could circle and rise and soar. And, above her, calling her, was the being that nature had meant for her mate. An hour half run out . . . and after that, into the cage again!

He had started to his feet and was bending over her, never touching her.

"Tell me," he asked, "what is your name?"

"Juliana."

"Juliana. . . ." He lingered on the liquid syllables. Then speaking quickly: "It is the name by which I am to keep you in my heart," he whispered. "That other name, the name that binds

you, I will have none of it. I am glad not to know it. I am glad you do not pronounce it.—Where were you born, Juliana?"

"In Italy."

"Italy! . . . The land of Juliet, the land of Beatrice! Juliana, you bring her music on your tongue, you bring her skies in your glance, her night in your hair. You have her love in your veins. Tell me no more. I am spirit, but I am flesh and blood too. I dare not!"

He drew back from her. She saw his hand grasp the table, marked the tremor that shook it. For the first time she could not endure the fire of his gaze and her eye drooped. A tremor, answer to his own, ran through her. Silence came between them.

The torches were nearly all dead. The prelate's tomb was lost in darkness; like a palpable thing, gloom was creeping up the church, from pillar to pillar, and all about them. Soon nothing would be left but the white oasis of the altar table, candle-lit, though still here and there a spark of fire gleamed about the nave. It seemed as if a thousand mysterious voices had been waiting for this moment of silence and darkness to uplift themselves. There came echoes and murmurs from the blank spaces: now a clank of chains, as the wolf restlessly turned in his bed; now a puffing sigh from the dozing bear. High up above their heads, the bat continued its narrow rings of flight, moving with ghosts of sound more stealthy than silence itself.

The September night had clouded without; probably rain was falling, for the wind had died. The tracery of the windows was but faintly visible in the great shell of gloom—here and there slender spectre shapes upon the denser shade. Ever and anon some small

flake of stone or cement, detaching itself from the crumbling arches, ran into the silence as a trickle of water into a tranquil pool: the sands of time, dropping through the hour-glass, still measuring the life of the fallen church. Into the atmosphere of the place, which had been full of the resinous pungency of the torches, there now began to creep an earthy vault-like smell, as if it were the breath of the dead, chill and all invading. It seemed to her that the life lingering about them in the old church gave way before it, as the life of waters before the spread of ice.

A clock bell struck upon the night—a single note that pulsed slowly away. Thereupon movement and clatter started without. Juliana knew it was the end of her hour. She looked at Wroth and read it also in his ashen face and trembling lip.

"The last toast that the Abbey shall ever hear," cried he then. "Wroth drinks to his lady!"

He reached for one of the flagons that stood as yet untouched upon the stone and began pouring the dark wine into the skull. His hand was steady—Juliana liked to remember this. Then he raised the strange and awful cup in both hands, and over it his eyes flamed upon her:

"Before you go, before you pass back into the night, I drink to you—to the queen of my life. To my queen! To my lady! With every drop of wine that mingles with my blood it becomes consecrate to you! Listen, Juliana, for ever my beloved: never shall these lips touch woman's in life again—never again, but to you, shall this voice utter words of love. My soul has claimed yours. My body is henceforth for ever yours. So help me heaven!"

Then he lifted the skull and drank. And it seemed to Juliana as if it were her life that was passing into

him, her soul, her very blood. It was their kiss of union; their kiss of renunciation.

He had drained the cup without once withdrawing it from his lips. Now, as he held it from him and drew a gasping breath, Juliana started from the trance-like state in which all her being had been absorbed into his. —The whole flagon at a single draught! Deep potations were usual enough, she knew, but this was incredible, this was madness.

"It is the end," he said in a loud voice.

He turned the goblet: a few purple drops fell from it. Between both hands he tore the skull from the socket, crushing the massive mountings as if they had been cardboard. "I can break a crown-piece between my fingers" had been no vain boast. Then he dashed the two pieces from him.

"None shall ever drink from old Ambrose's brain-pan again," he cried wildly.

The skull hopped and rolled down the steps. A flush had mounted to his face, he was panting; he staggered and caught blindly at the nearest chair. Juliana rose, sadness and dread upon her. The sacristy door had opened under a decorous hand. Sedate footsteps, accompanied by a genteel tripping, a rustling of silk, came towards them: Bertram, the butler, advanced, conducting Mrs. Panton. Concern wrote itself on his withered fatherly face—concern, but no surprise.

"Oh, my lord, my lord!" said he. Shame for his master struggled with the pity in his tones. Mrs. Panton, unctuous reprobation on her face, swept up to her mistress.

"Ah, Bertram," cried Wroth thickly, "you'll take the bear and the wolf to the kennels. The church has been re-consecrated—do you hear?—the church has been re-consecrated!"

He swayed as he clutched the crocket of the gothic chair; steadied himself but swayed again. Juliana averted her eyes.

"Madam," said the old servant, his voice trembling, "the carriage waits you at the porch—Madam, allow me to conduct you."

Through his confused senses Wroth caught the words. He made a start forward, and fell, almost at Juliana's feet.

"My lord, oh, my lord!" cried Bertram again.

He hovered in distress between the lady and his master's prostrate form. Then affection overcame decorum. He knelt down, and pulled apart the stock which held the young throat. Wroth stirred, half opened unseeing eyes, and Bertram thought to catch the muttered words: "Let me lie here."

Quicker of comprehension, Juliana had heard aright: "Let me die here. . . ." Her heart echoed the sigh. Would she herself could have died a little while ago, when they had soared in the heights together.

"He's dreadful drunk, my lady!—Oh, my lady," cried Mrs. Panton, full of remorseful concern, "why did I leave you?"

With a groan Bertram laid the beautiful flushed head down once more upon the stone; then rose, took a guttering candelabrum from the table, and bowed before the visitor.

"Pray, madam——" he urged.

She followed him silently; Panton went behind her, waggling her great bonnet. Trouble was in her excellent heart: how could she have abandoned her ladyship to the young reprobate? They were surely all bewitched to-night! She expected reproaches as they drove away—some outcry at least: she was met by a dumbness that cowed her.

Grand old words of lament were ringing in Juliana's heart:

"Lucifer, star of the morning, how art thou fallen! . . . Oh, the high peaks . . . the lofty blue!—And then, this!"

All at once something seemed to break within her and the tears came.

CHAPTER III

MRS. PANTON kept silence for the better part of the way. If she suspected her mistress's tears, silently shed in the darkness, she did not dare intrude upon them. It was only when Juliana stirred, sighed, and bent forward to the open window as if trying to pierce the gloom that Mrs. Panton began to give vent to her overcharged feelings: What could her ladyship think of her for having left her alone with that wicked nobleman and his wild beasts?

Her ladyship had thought nothing but that Mrs. Panton had obeyed orders.

This was not encouraging; but once started, the subject was too enthralling to be dropped.

"O, my lady, such an experience! The tales that Mr. Bertram has told me this night! The things we have seen, he says, is nothing to what goes on at times. His heart is broken over it all. A nice, civil-spoken, respectable old man as ever I came across! 'And why do you stay?' (says I to him). 'Stay?' says he, 'why, I was born here,' he says, 'and I had my lord's father in my arms when he was born, and my lord himself! Stay?' he cries. 'And if he were my own son,' and his voice began to tremble, 'he couldn't be dearer to my heart.' 'What! That hell-rake?' I says. 'He is that,' he groans. 'Drunkard,' says I. 'No drunkard, ma'am, if he does drink too much now

and again.' 'Gambler,' I go on, 'by what you tell me.' 'No gambler,' he answers me in the same way, 'though he plays deep, often, I'll not deny it.' 'With a black temper,' I says, remembering his lordship's face, my lady, as he lugged that ravening brute of a wolf. 'My poor boy,' says Mr. Bertram, shaking his head, 'he has that. But he's sadly crossed at times.' 'And a black heart,' I let out. (I was getting warm and bold, my lady, with my feet on the fender, and a drop of lemon punch, hot. And it worried me that the old man should be so obstinate. Such a grand house, as it is. Mr. Bertram's own little room, fit for a prince; all panelled; that cosy! And corridors you could drive a coach and four through. And the master of it all spending his life and his money on waste and wickedness, as Mr. Bertram told me, and as I could see for myself.) 'A black heart,' I says. 'No,' he cries, rising at me with a shout. 'I'll not hear that word from mortal lips. No,' he repeats, 'foolish, misled, hot-blooded, but at heart he's good and sweet and sound. Aye, and who should know it better than myself who've never had an ill look from him all his life, not an ill word for all that I take it upon myself to rebuke him, forgetting my place and his as often as not? Ma'am,' he says to me then, 'you'll not believe it, but no matter whom he has with him, he'll never sit down to his dinner without giving me a glass of wine first. Pours it out himself and hands it to me as I stand behind his chair. "There, my old Bertram," he'll say——' The poor old man, my lady, the tears ran down his face as he spoke!"

There was a pause. Juliana made no comment. Yet, had Mrs. Panton's narrative displeased, it would have been promptly checked, as the good woman knew; she therefore took heart of grace and proceeded with

fresh gusto, charmed that the sound of her own voice should beguile the tedium.

"I declare, my lady, you could not help pitying the poor old fellow. All among such a set of wild wastrels! It was hardly a minute they would let him rest. Now it would be the footman in upon him (and an impudent lot they are!) for more wine out of the cellar for the gentlemen to drink in the dining-room. And a pretty set the gentlemen were, my lady, them as were dressed as monks, you know. We could hear them at it, shouting, singing, quarrelling; and two or three of their valets would be coming in on us, too, wanting this and that for themselves. One of them, if you please, never could finish his supper without a glass of curaçao! And another nips a bottle of port wine that was meant for his master—a Frenchman he was. 'Port,' he says, 'English port and English ladies are what I like—not meaning you,' he says, grinning at me like a monkey, 'but the little misses. Not the big magnums long in bottle, but the little pints just fresh from the wood——' whatever he meant by that, my lady. I just rolled my eye at him; I thank my Maker I can hold my own with any impudent foreigner. And then, when we might have settled at last to a quiet cosy talk, the old man got the fidgets—he was up and running to the door every minute. And at last he went away and when he came back: 'I have been listening in the sacristy,' he said, 'I thought your lady might be wanting something. But it's all right, all quiet in the church—only my lord and your lady talking, quite genteelly.' 'Ho!' says I, looking at him hard, 'and what did you think my lady might be wanting?' At that he said nothing, but mopped his forehead, looking back at me piteous-like. 'Ho!' says I again, 'you haven't that good opinion of your master

after all,' (asking your ladyship's pardon). And again he says nothing, but looks at me, till I couldn't but think of a baby going to cry. 'Never fear,' I says, to console him, 'it would be a bold man' (again begging your ladyship's pardon) 'as would offer rudeness to my lady.'"

Her mistress interrupted her sharply:

"You would have done better, Panton, to have left me out of your gossip."

"My lady!" ejaculated the maid, much injured. "Why," she went on, "I would not as much as mention your ladyship's name, nor breathe where we came from, or where we were going beyond Maidstone—and the post-boy had already told 'em that. The old man tried hard enough at first to find out. But, 'no,' I says, 'my lady has no right to be here at all, and I'll not give her name to be bandied about, and made light with afterwards.' 'Ah,' he says—he was a respectable, good old man—'Ah,' he sighs, 'you're right, ma'am; the place is not fit for such as her, as I saw the instant I laid my eyes on her. You do well. These poor walls shouldn't as much as hear the echo of her name.'"

The travelling chaise reached Maidstone in the small hours of the night. And when, after much waiting, Juliana at last obtained admittance at the posting inn, she dismissed Lord Wroth's servants and horses with a handsome gratuity and orders to return instantly to Hurley.

Through the remnant of the night in her hastily-prepared chamber, sleeping and waking, she was haunted by vivid-coloured visions of that fantastic hour at the Abbey. The young pale face of Wroth rose ever before her, now kindled as with demoniac scorn and anger, now set in lines of high renunciation—through all beautiful. Again and again, as she stared, wide-eyed,

into the darkness, she relived the extraordinary scenes. Again she was sitting in the high carven chair with the mysterious vastness and gloom of the Abbey about her; again he was kneeling by her, pouring his confession into her ear. She felt once more the fire of his sudden passion scorch her, while yet his spirituality was like the fanning of great wings that kept pure airs about her. But when ever and anon a snatch of sleep came upon her, dreams ran unbridled. Instead of seeking the great cup, his lips were drawing near hers; but ever before they kissed she woke—except once, and then at the touch of his lips she found herself soaring in an ecstasy the like of which she had never conceived possible. It was the very ecstasy that broke the dream. Evil visions she had, too; hauntings of slavering wolves, of bears hugely rearing, of dancing devil-monks, of a bat, scarlet-winged, circling in giddy rounds.

She was glad when the late dawn broke; glad to hear Mrs. Panton's soft heavy tread upon the boards and to know that the reasonable dull day of ordinary life had started after this night of incredible experience.

She thought she could take up her ordered existence where she had left it. She had yet to learn that to the eyes that have been given certain revelations the whole world is changed. What the hour in the Abbey had begun her dreams had completed. Juliana's soul was inviolate no longer.

Notwithstanding the fatigues of the night, she insisted upon an early start and post-horses were ordered for the next stage, to Canterbury. There, at the *Fleur de Lys*, the goal of her journey was reached at last.

Mrs. Panton stood ostentatiously apart, sniffing high disapproval, while her mistress, before even bespeaking

rooms, made enquiries which changed the landlady's first unctuous obsequiousness into amazement:

Was not one Miss Vaughan in the house?

The hostess measured the traveller's distinguished appearance, shaking her head: she had no visitor of any quality staying there at present, no one likely to be known to the lady.

But the traveller insisted; she had been informed, at Tunbridge Wells, and by the manager of the Thespis Company himself, that Miss Vaughan had been left at this hotel—Miss Vaughan, the young actress.

A scornful light of understanding broke upon the hostess' countenance.

Miss Vaughan? Beljoy, Miss Beljoy was what the creature had called herself to them. So, it was for no visitor of standing the lady was enquiring: but for the sick play-actress, the minx in the garret. Aye, indeed, she had been dropped into the *Fleur de Lys* by the strollers. A baggage! . . . and sick, into the bargain! Only a deep sense of Christian obligation had kept the landlady from turning her out into the street. And the girl was dying, they said; it was a bad thing for an inn to have a death in it. And those that had left her —on the sly, she might say—had not so much as left a guinea with her.

The good woman's eye brightened, however, as she talked; her somewhat slow wits worked—there was money in this new arrival or she did not know her business; and perhaps her Christian charity might not turn out so bad a speculation after all. Juliana broke in upon her verbiage:

"Take me to her," she said in her quiet voice.

Juliana, Contessa Mordante di Belgiojoso, the young wife of an old husband, wielded great power in the

extended circle of which she was mistress; childless, however, and with little taste for society, she had but one absorbing occupation: the care of the poor. In the wide, lonely estates near Florence, up in the mountains where most of her summers were spent—while by amicable consent the count ministered to his gout at Baden-Baden, or Bourbonne—she played Providence to his peasants, taught the children, started young couples in life, gave comfort alike to birth and death. So she had experience of misery and sickness.

As she stood in the squalid room that had been thought good enough for a strolling play-actress to die in, and looked down at the flushed, haggard face, she knew that here Death was not.

The girl, who had been dozing, started awake; and, at first, seemed to take her visitor for a terror of the fever, for she cried aloud and hid her eyes.

But Juliana spoke in soothing; and presently Peggy Vaughan, alias Miss Beljoy, turned eyes of amazement at her foster-sister. Juliana's gaze was misted over with that sorrow of hers that rarely knew tears.

"O, Peggy," she said, "my poor Peggy, whom I left a little merry girl! How have you come to this?"

Peggy knew that it was not to her bodily sickness the words referred, but to the deeper sickness of the soul. Anger rushed crimson to her face. She sat up with singular vigour:

"What do you want with me?" she cried. "I never sent for you. What is it to you what I've come to? I've gone my own way, begged from nobody. I suppose a poor girl may be let die in peace, without being talked at." She was shaken by a sudden spasm of coughing; and as Juliana supported her in her arms, the girl broke into gasping sobs, clutching at the kind hands. "I don't want to die—I don't want to die!"

"But you're not dying, Peggy. No, my dear. See now, you're breathing quite easily; you never have been dying—not with those eyes and that pulse! (Panton, tell them to prepare a room next to mine, with a good fire.) I'm going to look after you, and make you well. (Do you hear, Panton?)"

Mrs. Panton, who stood watching in deep displeasure from the threshold, flung up her hands. But when her ladyship commanded in such a tone there was nothing for it but obedience.

As the door closed, Juliana sat down by the bed, And bit by bit, poor Peggy was drawn to tell her story; the common sordid story. It was on no high wave of passion misplaced, no tide of artistic temperament, that she had gone to ground. She was sick of home, that was all. And Polly Lewis, from the village, had gone on the pantomime, and had made fine friends, and had gold and furs—aye, and diamonds. And then had come the money from Italy——

Juliana groaned:

"The money I sent you for your wedding clothes!"

Peggy's fevered lips broke into a smile, part mischief, part scorn. It was likely she would wed with that common farming chap and go on feeding chickens and milking cows the rest of her life—she who had twice the looks and forty times the spirits of Polly Lewis! She tossed her head against the dingy pillow with a conscious jerk, and reared her slender throat. Yes—she had taken the money from Italy and gone to London to join Polly. And she had had a good time. Her mouth quivered, as she spoke, and the long green eyes, in their morbid shadows, glowed at the memory.

Sad was Juliana as she watched. All that Peggy regretted was the passing of her good time. The girl had a sob in her throat as she went on. . . . The money

had slipped away so fast—and Polly Lewis had proved a beast. Peggy had fallen from depth to depth; and then, at starvation point, had found a chance again. Miserable as it was, it was better than nothing, and would certainly have led to something good in the end. She had been noticed. She had a friend, a gentleman, one of Polly's grand acquaintances. She paused with an ogle from which the other woman, in shame, averted her eyes.

Peggy shot a swift glance, full of cunning and observation, at her grand foster-sister, and choked back the words that were rising to her lips. She coughed. A strolling company on tour; it was a devilish life, all said and done. She had caught this cold and they had dropped her here, the beasts! And that slut, Rose Amoretta, was going to play her part at the Wells; and had stolen her green velvet mantle! Her voice rose into shrillness over this culminating offence and a new choking fit seized her. She caught the sheet to her mouth:

"There's blood on it again!" she screamed, and turned livid with the fear of death upon her.

A meek patient she proved thereafter. Juliana had her way with her, in spite of Mrs. Panton, whose simple creed it was that, if the Lord chose to remove from this world one who had disgraced her family, it was nothing short of sinful to interfere.

Out of the stuffy attic, away from the litter of crushed bandboxes and tawdry finery, from the broken iron bedstead and the billows of musty feather bed, to the gay little guest-chamber next Juliana's own, where the firelight danced on panelled walls and the chintz of the four-poster bed had a pattern of moss-rose buds —it was a huge step to convalescence in itself. Then

came the doctor—a different person from the apothecary who had generously blooded her gratis. A very nice old gentleman he seemed, with wise silver-rimmed spectacles and a snuff-box, who spoke of her case in such monstrous long words that Peggy was lost in mingled fear and pride. Altogether a not disagreeable time for the little strolling actress. Such a person of importance had she become! Such pretty wrappers of her rich foster-sister's were now hers to wear; such soft clean pillows to lie against, such succulent soups to swallow.

Like a cat, she stretched and curled, and licked her lips. Panton, who washed her briskly and brushed her hair flat with stern disapproving hands, was, it is true, a disconcerting element in this new existence; and so was the ever-lurking anxiety touching her own condition. Juliana had private talks with the physician and she had not repeated her assurance of swift recovery. At times Peggy would be seized with a cold sweat of apprehension; why should such an one as Juliana, the great lady, the severely good woman, be so kind, so indulgent to such as she if it were not that she was dying?

But the day came at last when Peggy was promoted to an armchair by the fire; and, towards its dusky hour, when the only light in the room came from the glowing hearth, Juliana entered upon her, took seat by her side, and for a little while sat in silence. She had a bunch of white winter anemones in her hand and looked down at them, without speaking. Peggy knew she had something weighty to say; her heart began to beat quickly. Then Juliana leaned forward and clasped the girl's thin fingers.

"My little foster-sister," she said; "I have made up my mind; I am going to carry you away with me to Italy. To the sunshine."

"Can I not get well in England?" asked Peggy, taken aback and pulling her hand away.

"Not with the winter coming on; it is too great a risk. And I must go back. I have come a long way for your sake and stayed longer than I had intended. And my husband wants me."

Peggy's green eyes grew round in the firelight. She drew her breath with a gasp.

"You came for me?" In her heart she thought her foster-sister a mighty fool. How little would she have cared what became of Peggy, had she been Juliana!

"I came when I got that letter from your mother—that letter in which she told me, at last, of her deep trouble about you."

Peggy tossed her head.

"I heard from her again to-day," went on the grave, soft voice, "and she is so happy again now, Peggy, to know you safe with me. I have told her that I should take you away to the blue sky and the warm air. There will be roses where we are going—roses in December! And you will get well and strong."

The girl pondered. Certainly with these shaking limbs and this swimming head she could never dance a jig, with these husky notes ring out an impudent lilt. She required a great deal of care still, and comfort about her and rest—she knew that—if she was to be fit for anything again. But there was her friend—he who was a real fashionable gentleman, who was so seductive, and had such a way with him and lived among such fine folk, lords, and that! Peggy had never seen any one more to her fancy, so far—to be whisked suddenly out of the country, without the possibility even of seeing him again first! The thought was altogether displeasing. But if she did not go,

what then? She had no illusions about her position in his regard; worn and hollow-eyed she would meet with little favour. She was a merry little devil, he had told her once and again, and that was what he liked her for.

But Juliana was a terribly righteous person to live with.

"Shall I become well and strong—in Italy?" Peggy asked at length, pondering.

"Yes," said Juliana, "well and strong . . . and good," she went on after a little pause: "And in the summer you can come home again. Oh, Peggy, you'll be glad to get into your mother's arms——"

When she was well and strong—and good! Peggy was a girl of rapid decision. She knew instantly what part of the programme she would carry out, what part neglect. The fire-glow was falling; the great lady, lost in her benevolent plans, failed to see the contemptuous smile that twisted the pretty, pale, impudent face as her *protégée* at last dropped her demure consent.

"If you please, my lady——" Panton held an open letter in her hand; indignation breathed from her countenance. "I have found something that you ought to know of. Who does your ladyship think that rascal post-boy was ordered to kidnap yonder awful night of the tenebree, or whatever he called it?"

Juliana scarcely glanced up from her needle. She drew her brows together.

"Dated Hurley Abbey, if you please; from one of those crazy young gentlemen that were raging round as monks. Listen, my lady: 'Pretty Peggy, it is all arranged; scream as much as you like to keep up the farce. . . .'"

"What is that?" interrupted Juliana, with sudden sharpness.

"A letter, my lady, a letter. I come across it just now, as I was packing up that minx's flithers——"

"Panton, for shame! How shall we teach the poor child to go straight if honest people do such crooked things? Her letter! Take it back this instant where you found it. No—I'll not hear another word! And besides, what does it matter now?"

Mrs. Panton, no whit abashed, turned the purloined missive over and over between her large finger and thumb.

"Martindale, the young gentleman's name is," she pursued stolidly. "And a pretty young gentleman he must be! And fine goings on they seem to have had already! 'A kiss to my pert Peg!'—Peg! . . . I'd peg the pertness out of her!"

"Panton, be silent!" cried Juliana, impatient laughter struggling with severity. But Panton had not been Juliana's nurse for nothing. Her little eyes gleamed with sudden fury:

"And your ladyship is going to take that piece to Italy with you? Into your own house! And you think, with coddling and petting, and smiling on her, you'll turn her good? That sort will always be in mischief if there's a man within a mile. Your ladyship thinks she's repentant? She's laughing in her sleeve already! Nurse her back to life! A warming up of vipers, I say. Pretty use she'll make of her health! I shouldn't be doing my duty, if I didn't warn you."

Juliana turned pale; there was an earnestness about Panton that impressed her in spite of herself. And, as much in rebuke for her own want of faith as for her woman's want of charity, she exclaimed in reproach:

"And where does God come in?"

"He does not come in at all," said Panton with

much directness; "not with Peggy Vaughan!" And with a last shake of the letter she left the room.

Juliana remained lost in deep reflection. The memory locked away in her heart, as something at once too troubling and too entrancing for deliberate thought, had been intruded upon with this rough and common touch. It hurt her; and, at the same time, it alarmed her that it should hurt so much.

And Panton's warning troubled and would not be dismissed. When we reach Italy, when we are home, she said to herself, trying to hush the uneasy voice within her, all will be well again. Italy, home, the ordered life, the protection of her husband's presence against herself—peace!

CHAPTER IV

In the great state bedchamber at Torre di Montemuscoli, the mountain castle where he had been born, Cesare Mordante, Conte di Belgiojoso dei Vespi, lay dying. Juliana his wife sat in the shadow of the bed curtains, waiting. It was full summer heat without: a white glow, beneath which the whole land seemed to simmer and vibrate. But within those walls of stone, ten feet thick and more, there was a still, cool atmosphere, unaffected by the seasons, like that of some antique church. Logs were even smouldering on the wide hearth, for the lord was cold with an ever-deepening chill, and had liked to look upon the glimmer of red in the dimness of the room. Curtains were drawn across the cavernous window embrasures.

The sick man was dozing. Through the shadows, Juliana's eye, attuned to the gloom, could distinguish the emaciated, ivory white head propped against the pillows; the long, thin outline under the canopy. Facing the bed there hung a great crucifix frowning down upon her—mediæval, Gothic, terrible; image of a God done to death by sinners, no mild Christ dying to save! The golden wasps, badge of the family, gleamed out of the crimson brocade that here and there concealed the bare stone of the walls. Words of the ancient family motto, graven into the high chimney hood, leaped capriciously into light with every flicker of the sucking woodflame; now *Mordet*, now *Gaudens*,

now *Vespa.* One hand, inert as death itself, lay very close to her on the counterpane. This was the last Mordante di Belgiojoso dei Vespi—the last of the brilliant, restless, fierce and handsome race, deadly to its enemies, fatal to its friends, flashing through the sunshine of life with as daring a joy as the winged stinging thing it had accepted as its badge. It had been the pride of all the Mordanti to live up to their Motto: *Mordet Vespa Gaudens.*

The irony of it pierced her as she sat and watched. An old man dying—all that was left. There was a complete stillness, save for the faint licking of the flame, the dull humming of the flies high in the vaulted ceiling and the faintly hissing breath from the bed sometimes singularly rapid, sometimes stopping altogether, sometimes broken as with a little click of the machinery that was running down so fast. It must have been close on noon, but Juliana had no notion how long she had sat, watching, waiting. Ever since those solemn ceremonies of the Church, which the Count had accepted this morning with an air of polite acquiescence not unmixed with humour, she had not left him.

The heavy peasant priest, who had lived all his years at Montemuscoli in much fear of its master, had ministered and been dismissed with the Count's most determined courtesy. After the majestic function, he had made his clumsy bow towards the bed and had wished the dying man a good recovery—at which the latter had smiled a fine far-off smile.

"*Ma,* if God wills otherwise," had supplemented the padre, "then to heaven!" And even as he said it, he had broken into perspiration at his own temerity, and flung a piteous eye at grave Juliana, his comrade in the ministration of so much charity. But the Count

had, for his words, another smile which haunted the priest all his way back to the village.

Thereafter old Mordante would have none by him but his young wife. He was in no pain; was very comfortable; but tired, tired, dissolving with weariness! Juliana knew it was the end, for the great doctor from Florence, who was now comfortably occupied at his midday meal in the adjoining room, had told her so without circumlocution: it is bad for a physician's reputation to allow unfounded hopes. The gout had gone to Count Mordante's stomach: he would pass like a burned-out candle.

In that air, already death-tainted, hung incense mixed with the sharp pungency of the essences with which the patient's forehead had been bathed, when he had turned a little faint, after his elaborate morning toilet. The silence, the dimness, the oppressive atmosphere, the brooding sense of dull expectation, all combined to weigh heavily on Juliana's energies. She had not slept that night, did not feel as if she could ever sleep again, but she was dazed. For months she had fought against the obsession of memory, battling even in her dreams with its dangerous allurement. Now it seemed as if in lassitude she could fight no longer. Her thoughts slipped away from her; ever and again she was back in the desecrated Abbey of Lady's Grace at that midnight hour, when, with the deep shadows about her, amid the sighs of the crumbling walls, she had met and lost the first and only romance of her life. She caught herself back with fierce anger, with loathing of herself; that at this hour of all hours she should fail! She tried to pray, to turn her heart to sorrow: the old man had been very good to her. She must not—heaven drive the infamy from her!—would not let her mind rest for an instant on what freedom might mean. Yet

—he of the red-brown eyes was with her, in the very chamber of Death, he was kneeling by her chair, whispering into her ear, his presence seemed to enfold her.

"Juliana . . ."

She started with a fierce leap of the heart. Out of the shadows, under the spreading canopy, the dying man was watching her. His eyes were terribly dark in a face which seemed to have shrunk even since she had last looked on it and to be investing itself ever more with the hue of clay. On his lips was that faint, strange smile, mysterious, ironic; that smile which had once been for many a woman's undoing, and was now so troubling on a countenance of death. She bent over him, anguish in her gaze.

"You are worse! Your hand is ice. I shall call the doctor——"

The stiff fingers slowly closed on hers; she felt the chill of them run to her heart.

"Neither doctor nor priest—only you. Draw back the curtains, it grows very dark; I want to see you a last time."

The sentences were short—for he had small breath—but distinct. His mind, through the dissolution of the flesh, shone unnaturally clear. After yesterday's physical agony this peace was wonderfully grateful to him; yet it was this peace, this rest, this freedom from pain that spelt the end.

Moving as one in a dream, she went to the windows and flung back the folds. Into the great room struck shafts of vivid light; upon one of them, through the open casement, a wasp sailed in singing, fierce and gay. It circled about Juliana's dark head as she returned to the bed.

Mordante was still smiling. Her heart swelled with

a suffering like to none she had ever suffered; yet she had no tears.

"You are a very beautiful woman," said the extinguished voice, "beautiful and calm. It always pleased me, your calm."

She could find no word for him. His attitude towards the dread moment paralysed her. It was not the pagan's stoicism, not the Christian's courage; it was merely indifference. Her soul cried out for the priest, for the comfort of those words she had heard at her mother's passing: "Into thy hands, O Lord!" But for him, how could they be said? He was going as the leaf goes from the tree, it seemed, as lightly, as naturally to earth. But the spirit that looked forth indomitably alive from the dimming eyes: whither?

Again her hand, pulsing with warm life, sought his. He could no longer return the pressure. The great sleep was creeping upwards steadily; but he could still look and speak.

"*Cara*, I make no apologies. I might have afflicted you with a wheeled chair——" His smile flickered, faded, renewed itself. "The last Mordante! The last —you will pass on the wealth only." His lips drooped, she had to bend closer to catch the words. "Juliana, you will have beautiful children."

She thought he was wandering, and, for the first time, had the smart of tears in her eyes. Her poor old husband, had he, in his heart, dreamed of that?

But the next instant his gaze was full upon her, lucid, ironic, amused. It seemed as if he had read her thought; and even before his dying gaze she blushed. He made a supreme effort, always smiling:

"You will marry again, *Amor*, *Amor* . . . Your life, Juliana, begins where mine ends. Eh," he cried

of a sudden, shrilly, "there is a wasp about your hair! Have a care of the sting!"

His eyeballs, upturned, fixed themselves. There was a vast moment of silence, into which the wasp sang. Then Cesare Mordante, Conte di Belgiojoso dei Vespi, closed his eyes and breathed once as in unspeakable comfort. It was the last sigh of a great race. On his lips the smile was set.

It was night, after that day of irrevocable event, and she who alone now of all the world had the right to the name of Mordante came slowly from her long vigil by the dead into the room known through long usage as the Count's study. She went steadily to the great chair where, to her knowledge, no one had ever sat but her husband. Candles were burning on the top of the secretaire, casting a narrow circle of yellow, promptly swallowed up by the surrounding gloom. On the tapestry hangings glimmered here and there the gold of the embroidered wasps. As Juliana sank into the chair, the feelings that had been seething in her ever since the moment of his passing suddenly took the form of a resolve. This death was not freedom for her, but rather the seal of immutable union. Henceforth it was her fate to sit in his place, to uphold his name, administer his fortune, cherish his people. Else was she nothing but the woman who, by her husband's deathbed, had been lost in thought of another man; who amid the sighs of the departing had rejoiced at the prospect of liberty; who could even now find no tear with which to mourn him who had been to her kind friend, great gentleman, from the moment he had set her by his side. A calmness, a curious strength, succeeded the torments of self-reproach upon the taking of this decision. Her life lay before her as a road, straight and white; marked

with tall cypresses that rigidly pointed upwards—shapes of inexorable duty. But she felt courage enough for the lonely way: even to-night she would set her feet upon the first step. She had work before her which must be done.

Early that morning, while waiting for the priest's arrival, Mordante had given her a few concise instructions. Now she was to be mistress of castle and estate, all authority was to emanate from her: he told her where to find his last letter of directions.

Swift in Italy is the passage from the deathbed to the tomb. She had already wasted over much time in prayer and self-searching. Yet, with the key in the lock, she paused again upon her task. It was strange how his living presence seemed to haunt this room; seemed to be so much more vividly with her now than that marble figure beyond, with its faint mocking smile.

Witty company had Cesare Mordante always been; though his wit had a sting in it, as suited his motto. She had seen him angry, once or twice, with swift and terrible anger that struck instantly. And mocking, humorously interested in life, cynically amused with others' weakness, she had always known him. A phrase, that had once fallen upon her ear in a crowded Florence salon, recurred to her mind: "Listen to Mordante laughing—that means that some one has been stung!" But never for her, her heart cried out, had there been anger or derision; for her, never anything but an exquisite courtesy and gentleness. Memories of his generosity, of his patience, rushed back upon her, gratefully. When had his indulgence failed her, even to the furtherance of her most lavish charities—charities for which he had little sympathy, in which she knew herself indiscriminate—even to the toleration in his

house, in her intimacy, of the poor English waif, Peggy? Juliana sighed and opened the bureau.

Uppermost in the drawer lay a large sealed sheet, directed to herself. She broke the seal with steady hands and read.

A long letter; the slender writing ran like the lines of a poem between wide margins:

"Cara amica," *it began, "when you read this you will be in the possession of your well-deserved reward for patience and virtue. You have done me great honour, Juliana, and I have fully appreciated it. Ser Vespasiano Santucci will bring you my testament and you will see that everything I have to leave is yours. Even those annuities which a sense of duty has imposed upon me I have preferred to leave to your discretion, well knowing that you will place my honour higher than any other consideration. The amount of the suggested annuity is fixed in each case, with, I beg you to believe, the most accurate discrimination.*

"*Among the names submitted to your wisdom and generosity there is one which will surprise you. I pray you be neither too much scandalised nor distressed, but rather to take to heart, dear Juliana, two facts to which you are at present, in your youth and incredible goodness, dangerously blind:*

"*Firstly, men have formed conventions of honour to suit their own nature; and therefore the conduct of a husband may sometimes prove the exact opposite of what he requires from his wife, without his being, on that account, either heartless or false to the name of gentleman. Imbue yourself well, my dear, with this truth, before that second marriage in which I sincerely wish you so much satisfaction.*

"The second fact will impress itself, I fear, somewhat heavily upon you: to confide in the repentance of a young and pretty sinner is to court disaster. And beware how you ever admit such an one again under the conjugal roof. I make the less apology for this revelation, for I that know it will materially assist you to banish your grief—that grief, I mean, which an over-sensitive conscience would probably lead you to cultivate for the memory of an old man who found so much content in your beauty and goodness, after an existence too well acquainted with beauty and wickedness.

"Your lovely eyes were never made for tears; all the better, dolce amica, *if you shed none for me. Nevertheless, it is in deep sincerity that I conclude by assuring you that the proudest of my titles was to be called your husband.*

"CESARE MORDANTE,
"Conte di Belgiojoso dei Vespi."

Juliana read; and, bewildered, read again. Then the blood rushed to her face. She crumpled the sheet in her fingers and dropped her arms by her side. Foolish indeed not to have understood at first perusal such clear statements.

Enough seven years of marriage had taught her of what had been the ethics of her husband's life. But with Count Belgiojoso's past, she had proudly told herself, she had no concern, and she had never dreamed of suspecting his present.

"One name may surprise you. . . ." "To confide in the repentance of a young and pretty sinner. . . ." "Beware how you admit such an one again under the conjugal roof." Too vilely plain was it whose name she was to find added to the shameful list! Under the

conjugal roof, and he an old man! Dying, the wasp had stung, and oh, the sting was in her heart!

In the first spasm of her pain, she had no room for the thought of the miserable creature through whom the wound had been dealt to her. Since she could not mourn her dead as widowed women should, all that had been left her had been respect, gratitude. Now—this letter seemed a planned insult. The charge it imposed, the confidence it expressed, was no honour, but a cynic's posthumous outrage on a wife's dignity.

Moved by an unreasoned impulse, she hastened back to the death-chamber, still clenching the sheet. She felt she must seek to read upon the dead face some answer to the enigma. From the very threshold, the icy peace of the room rebuked her rushing entrance. The curtains were all drawn back close to the four posts of the bed; at its foot had been placed a table bearing the awful crucifix between two candles. In the middle of the room kneeled an old woman servant, and beside her two nuns; she had a veil over her head, as if in the sacramental presence. All three rose as Juliana entered and respectfully retired. But as she passed out, old Zia Vanna shot an inquisitive glance at her mistress. Juliana marked that her eyes were as dry as her own: was there no one to weep for the dead man?

The young widow waited till the door closed upon the demure footsteps, the jingling rosaries; then she lifted a candle, and, stepping to the head of the bed, stood gazing down.

The light fell on the old face: it looked like yellow wax—a mere mask of worn-out humanity. The smile on the lips seemed to put her and her passionately storming heart, her heaving pride, her anger, at an infinitely remote distance. Here was one who had known more truly than most men the emptiness of life,

and had chosen to smile rather than weep. He lay now in his great peace, serenely ironic! What of her trouble—what of its futility? So runs the world: nothing lasts.

"Why do you complain?" the dead lips seemed to ask. "Of my care in sparing you a misplaced grief?" And, once again, the gasping whisper was in her ear: "Your life begins where mine ends . . ." No, this letter was not a treacherous stroke from the shelter of the grave; rather was it a deliberate, inhuman unselfishness—the last act of a relentlessly philosophic mind, whose knowledge of woman's nature was as profound as it was cynical. It was the sign-manual giving her freedom.

As Juliana bent, studying the features of the dead, she understood; but with this complete understanding came also a complete severance. As far removed as her warm leaping life was from his rigid immobility, so was every aspiration of her ardent soul from that denying spirit. She had vowed but a few minutes ago to devote herself to an honoured memory. Now, she knew that the remainder of her life would scarce suffice to wipe away this hour of initiation and bring a wholesome forgetfulness.

The chill that belonged to the corpse seemed suddenly to strike to her veins: she moved quickly away without even a last glance. That smile was abhorrent; it seemed to murder all that was divine within her. She felt she could not quickly enough go forth, believe again, hope again, know warmth and kindly folly. But, as she replaced the candle beside the crucifix, she paused, minded of the crushed paper in her grasp: one thing she had yet to do.

She held his last letter to the flame, and, as it flared up, cast it on the cold hearth and stood watching

till the last charred and curling flake settled into repose.

"Now it is finished," said she to herself, and went out—feeling as she closed the door of the death-chamber that she had closed it on a phase of her life.

To sleep would have been impossible. A fierce white flame seemed to burn in her brain, under which her future lay mapped out in new and startling tints, while her own nature stood suddenly revealed in hitherto unsuspected lights and shades. The sense of being watched by the household; the oppression of the great walls shutting her in, became suddenly unendurable: she felt she must out into the free air, into the wide night to think her new thoughts unhampered, her wide free thoughts.

Standing at last in the deep blue of the night upon the terrace, with airs of velvet softness about her and the wide-scented peace of the gardens falling away below, she drew a long breath. With a sigh as of ineffable comfort, Cesare Mordante had welcomed death. Now with even such a sigh, his young widow gave welcome to her new existence.

She sat down on a marble bench, and found herself smiling: she had not known herself so hard. What was the dead man to her now, but the man who had degraded his age, the house they had shared in common, the very sacredness of death. She had not known herself so proud; nor had she known herself so capable of joy, ever even guessed at the strength of her own youth and her own yearning for life. She was free! It was as if the shutters had been flung back in her soul and the light came pouring in; as if the bars of the cage had been broken, and the bird was taking flight, strong-winged. And now the voice to which she had so long denied a hearing could pour out its music, unrebuked:

"To-night I am soaring with you . . . Our spirits are mates . . . Our souls kiss."

Nothing now need keep her from the thought of him, this swift lover of hers, with the beauty of the fallen angel and the lofty spirit that could meet her on the heights; of the man who had seen her and forthwith loved her as the poet loves his vision; who, for the boon of one hour of her presence, had consecrated to her his whole existence.

Now, in the wondrous Italian night, she bade the haunting mysterious presence return to her. "Italy, the land of Juliet, the land of Beatrice . . . you bring her music on your tongue, her skies in your glance, her night glory in your hair! . . . You have her love in your veins."

She gave herself to his words. She stretched out her arms. Before another summer had burned itself out they should stand together here; together breathe that air, softer than caresses, balmy, warm, spiced, the breath of love. Together they should look down upon those lilies, ranks of silver ghosts against the cypress walk; and together they would count those cypress shapes—black sentinels upreared against this sky of unspeakable beauty, of indescribable tint: shimmering amethyst overhead, sapphire of immeasurable depth on the horizon.

And then, as their gaze wandered upwards, there would swim into their vision, even as now into her entranced eye, this exquisite crescent of waning moon, and they would see yonder faint pulse of dawn throbbing in the East, crowning their perfect night with the promise of the long day.

CHAPTER V

THE night after the funeral Juliana slept deep and dreamlessly. It was a physical as well as mental relaxation. The long, lugubrious ceremony of the day had left her heart untouched. Clay had been returned to clay, that was all. As for the mocking spirit, she knew now that it never could have had affinity with hers; why should she mourn when she was released from the link which bound her to such a thing? After the horrible struggle to keep her thoughts pure of even a memory, she was free: the sensation was vast and exquisite, like sudden ease after the thrall of accustomed pain.

As she laid her head upon the pillow, she said to herself: "I may dream to-night." Then had come these depths upon depths of slumber, in which she was lost as in the rest of death itself before the birth of a new life.

When she woke it was long beyond her usual hour. The sunshine was beating fiercely in through the deep windows open to the air. The insect rumour of blazing noon throbbed indefinably into the silence of her chamber—the dry chirp of the cicale, the hum of winged things. For a second or two she could not remember where she was and sat up staring at the tall lancet patches of blue sky, cut upon the grey stone wall, at the dim greens of the tapestry, as if at some dream vision.

Then came the conquering drone of a wasp circling in loops now high, now low—the tree-fruit was ripe in the gardens of Montemuscoli. For days past that cry of the summer's heat had scarce been out of her ears. Unnoticed before the death vigil, it must now be for ever charged with significance to her.

Thus the first pulse of her waking remembrance was painful: "The wasp has left his sting in my heart." The next moment, the mood of the night reasserted itself. It was over. He was dead: she was free. Her new life lay fair as unwritten parchment to her hand—nothing of this sordid past should sully it.

She had ever been a woman of few affections, and these had been given to the old: to her father; to the old French *émigré* who had been her childhood's master and whom she had adopted as her *parrain*—a second father, one, if the truth must be told, dearer than the real parent—to her husband, old enough also to have called her daughter. Thus she had never known any love that was not weighted with filial respect. And now she was indeed orphaned. Her father had died during the first year of her marriage; the adopted "godfather" was separated from her by all the length of Italy and France; her husband had been laid in his grave, more dead to her and more remote than either. Little wonder was it that she should turn to the young new love with the passionate freshness of an untried heart.

But the dead are not so easily banished. A man may lie by the side of his forefathers in the family vault, seemingly in the quietude that knows no possible disturbance; yet the devices of his brain, the deeds of his hand may still be active among those he has left behind.

"I am free now," repeated Juliana to herself, "I have peace, the past is dead." The thoughts ran in melody like the burden of a song. Even at that moment the castle echoed to some unusual clamour.

There were sounds of many voices, and a woman's uplifted cry of fury. And then the babel again. Juliana knew the excitable nature of her Italian household; but she also knew their tradition of decorum. It must be indeed a singular occurrence that could produce among them, in a house of mourning, such unseemly disturbance. And she thought to recognise in those shrill, high-pitched tones the voice of her foster-sister.

She had not seen Peggy since the Count's seizure. The girl had fled from the sight of his agonies with all the shameless egotism of self-indulgent natures; and from no part of the past was Juliana more determined to cut herself away than from her who had been the wretched instrument of affront to her wifely dignity. Through Mrs. Panton she had sent her foster-sister orders to return instantly to her home in England, with a sufficiency of money for the purpose. In the magnitude of her husband's fall she had scarce considered the girl's treachery to herself; it was as part of his degradation that Peggy must be thrust for ever into oblivion. Provided for she would be; but never again would Juliana look upon her face.

A sense of physical nausea came over her at the thought of being forced to depart from this resolution. But a scream echoed again, up through the long passages, piercingly. A cry this time, not of anger, but of fear. Juliana stretched out her hand to the bell.

At the first tinkle Panton was by her side—Panton, with an exasperating air of detachment from any

domestic scandal and pompously assiduous to the morning duty. On her mistress's inquiry, she shrugged huge shoulders and folded cushioned hands. With her ladyship's permission she would rather not explain. Indeed, she kept herself to herself; and there were things, in these foreign parts, where certain characters were concerned, that a self-respecting woman could not bring her tongue to talk about. Besides, she hoped she knew her place.

When Panton hoped she knew her place, Juliana gave up expecting any satisfaction from her. But events were now to speak for themselves.

The tempest broke into the very room. Peggy, a distraught creature, with streaming yellow locks and dishevelled travelling attire, rushed in "without by your leave or with your leave," as Mrs. Panton said, and flung herself, sobbing, screaming, inarticulately imploring, upon the bed.

"Save me, save me! They're devils, devils, beasts! It's not true! I'm innocent, save me!"

Outside the flung-back door were the pursuers, consulting each other in sibilant whispers, breathing indignation. At last, after a respectful knock against the panel, entered Battista, the majordomo. He had grown white-haired in the service of the house. He came and stood at the foot of his lady's bed. There was no bashfulness for him in the situation, for Italy is a country of simple customs, where your great lady will give her daily orders from her pillows to cook, coachman, and majordomo. But his long grey face worked and he stammered: what he had to say was not easy. One by one the women from the passage slipped in behind him. From Zia Vanna, the severe and pious, to little round-faced Marivola (whom Juliana petted as an orphan waif) what black eyes flashed, what nimble

hands gesticulated! How these daughters of the south, respectfully speechless, yet contrived to convey to each other their hot wrath, their abhorrence of the English *ragazza*, and their veneration for their mistress—one must know Italy to realize.

"In God's name!" exclaimed Juliana. "What is all this?"

She drew herself away from the touch of Peggy's frenzied hands. Mrs. Panton had a wag of her round head. It was months since she had warned her mistress that where Peggy was, the deity was not.

Battista pointed a dusky and trembling finger at the girl.

"La signorina——" he began huskily. The words were a signal for an outbreak of shrill feminine protest: "Signorina, indeed! wretch, rag, little thief!"

Voice rose above voice, epithet outran epithet. Some accused themselves for not having spoken before; others lamented that they had been so blind as never to suspect. And the miserable one, own foster-sister to their dear lady, and their lady so good to her—good as the Mother Mary herself!—saint—a creature of God, and on the very day of the Count's funeral! . . .

At the mention of the master there fell a sudden silence. The women quickly looked at each other, then at Peggy's heaving back, then at their mistress. And Juliana felt the sting to the core of her woman's pride: the sting of the wasp. Her face became set; her purple eyes took a steely flash. Never had the household seen their Madonna look like this.

"Speak, Battista—you others, keep silence!"

Battista told his tale in a husky whisper, as though it shamed him to say it aloud. Told it with embarrassed reticences, more galling to Juliana than could have been the most unsparing detail.

Ser Vespasiano, the notary, with Signor Lucchesi, his Excellency's steward, had been going through the family jewels, before handing them over in due form to her Excellency, according to his Excellency's testament. There were found missing a number of valuable gems. Signor Lucchesi had, in deep distress of mind, sent post-haste to Florence for one of the Grand-Ducal police commissaries, and this morning the whole of the household had been examined.

Here Battista paused; and the interval was filled in by many asseverations, nods, and exclamations behind him. With her face on the bed, Peggy lay now in a kind of breathless silence, and Juliana could feel the tension of her figure, the clutch of her desperate hands tightening on the bedclothes, the very beating of her heart.

It was known, resumed Battista, faltering, that on the very day of his seizure his Excellency had sent for the jewel casket, and it was known also—he stopped, turned two or three phrases vainly in his tongue, the sweat broke on his forehead—the English girl—her Excellency's sorellina—his Excellency's . . . Suddenly the old man took a firmer note. Inspiration had come, and there ran a sigh of deep sympathetic understanding about the group. His Excellency, in his great goodness of heart had allowed the stranger to view the beautiful and wondrous things, she being alone and melancholy, for it was her Excellency's day to visit the poor of our villages. Her Excellency would remember how sudden the attack came upon the lord Count. Zia Vanna had testified that it was the English signorina who replaced the jewels in the case. It seemed she had long suspected the English one.

Here the feminine chorus broke out afresh. Zia Vanna, who had a silky, penetrating, even voice,

proceeded upon a lengthy and deadly indictment. To sum all, the girl had been caught in the very act of flight. The missing jewels were discovered, artfully concealed in her box and about her person; and Ser Vespasiano and Signor Lucchesi conceived it their duty to hand the culprit forthwith to the police.

Peggy's lithe body leaped to the last word, like a snake disturbed. She wheeled round upon them, her pretty face distorted with terror and fury:

"He gave them to me!" she screamed in her broken Italian. "He gave them to me, you fools!" Then with a twist of her long neck she flung defiance at her foster-sister in her own tongue: "I defy you to prove that he did not give them to me!"

For a second or two, to the beating of hands, the clucking of palates, the groans of indignation provoked by her audacity, the girl stared at her benefactress.

Juliana dropped her lids to shut out that revelation of sordid triumph coupled with that leer of meaning. Mrs. Panton, standing apart, according to the attitude she had chosen to adopt, saw the wave of colour mount to her mistress's face, dyeing even the white throat; and her hand itched for Peggy's ears. But the tacit sympathy with the widow's pride, that kept even the simple peasant folk from touching on the culprit's deeper guilt, held her in unwonted restraint. Juliana spoke at last. The flush had faded; she was white as marble; her eyes were still cast down.

"Where are the jewels that were found?"

Battista answered. The official of police had retained them.

"Go, Battista," said Juliana then, very clearly, "and inform Ser Vespasiano and Signor Lucchesi that they have forgotten who rules here. It is for me to decide

how this matter is to be treated. I have the Count's last instructions; I shall know from them whether he has made a gift of these jewels, or whether they have been taken. Demand of the police official their immediate return, and beg him to be kind enough to await my instructions. You can all withdraw."

Never had Juliana spoken with such accents of severity to her *famiglia*. Crestfallen, one by one, they took their way in silence.

As the door closed, Peggy, standing with her back to the bed, her arms folded, suddenly dropped her air of insolence. She began to tremble; then to sob. Panton's little blue eyes surveyed her with satisfied fury. But neither dared speak to Juliana, who sat among her pillows with closed eyes, so pale against the loose dark coils of her hair; so singularly and ominously still.

Presently Battista returned; and with many bows laid on the bed a rope of pearls, an antique-looking pendant of brilliants and emeralds, a pair of emerald earrings.

Juliana acknowledged the action by a single glance; and Panton, peering eagerly, snorted her wordless opinion of the pilferer's selection.

"Go, Panton," ordered Juliana.

And now the foster-sisters were alone. Juliana's purple eyes opened full. She spoke but a single phrase:

"Peggy, the Count never gave you those."

Then the anger of fear took complete hold of the girl. In a tornado of sobs and words, she alternately denied and confessed, implored mercy and threatened vengeance. If she were put in prison the whole world should know! "He said they suited me, he promised he would give me some like them." "And how do you

know he didn't give them to me?" Finally came the blatant cry of her utter debasement. "Didn't he owe me something, wicked old man!"

But at length, through the storm, the stronger nature imposed itself upon the weaker; the menace of Juliana's silence became intolerable. Peggy's vague terror grew to mad panic. She sank on her knees, clawing again at the bedclothes; her screaming tones sank to abject whimpering. In the name of the breast that had nourished them both, in the name of their childish days together, she begged for pity.

"Prison! . . . Mercy on me, prison in Florence! Spare me this once—let me go! If you let me go now, I'll be good. I'll do anything in the world you ask me. I will. Listen: May God strike me dead if I don't!"

All at once Juliana sickened of the scene, sickened of her own part in it. Every hour of her life seemed tainted to her now with something of this uncleanness: even the memories of childhood, when she had known no dearer playmate than little Peggy!

She could not be rid quickly enough of such associations, have done with the old and begin with the new. Peggy could not soon enough be reprieved, the amount of her annuity—that something "the old man owed her"—decided upon, and the sight of her in her odious double gratitude banished. Yes, the girl must leave for England that very day.

The lawyer, the house steward, the police official, were interviewed in turn. It was an hour of abomination, with ever that comprehending suppression, that meaning silence at the back of it. The last deed of it was the confiding of the stolen jewels to Ser Vespasiano for immediate despatch, as a gift

from the widow, to the nearest relative of the house of Belgiojoso.

"Now it is done with," cried Juliana, as the door closed at last upon her solitude. But the serenity of her peace was gone, the warm hopefulness of her outlook. The living cannot throw off the dead.

CHAPTER VI

"My lord," said Wroth's majordomo in quavering tones, "there's two men come in a gig from Maidstone, and they're—they're——" His voice broke, and he was dumb upon words which it seemed he could only have uttered with tears.

The young man wheeled round. He had been standing, one hand on the chimney-piece, his head bent, gazing at the leaping of the flames round the logs.

"Well, what is it now, Bertram? Out with it!" he cried. His tone was imperious, but not unkind; his red-brown eyes flashed in a pale face.

"My lord, they are—oh, my lord, it is the end!" The sob would not be strangled. "They're bailiffs, my lord."

"Ha!"

"They are posting a notice of sale on the very hall door—the hall door, my lord!" Tears were running down the withered cheeks.

"Very well, set the bear on them. Professor Lebrun will give them a hug or two for their pains."

"My lord——"

"Master Lupus, then——"

"My lord, this is no joking matter."

Lord Wroth flung back his head and laughed out loud. A faint flush of reproachful anger had risen to the old servant's forehead.

"Ah, my lord, the honour of Wroth . . ."

"By gad! it's fairly picturesque!" cried my lord, flinging himself into a chair, crossing his booted legs and laughing once again. "Quite the romance of ruin: Faithful retainer in tears! Young rake, hardened! Servants clamouring for their wages! (I suppose they are clamouring, Bertram?) False friends flying! How many of the gentlemen have ordered their horses since last night? By George, they'd better be quick about it, lest the stables be taken in possession with their nags in them. And there will be nobody but you left to stand by me—stay, and Martindale. Martindale will not rat. And you'll offer me your savings, won't you, Bertram? And, by Bacchus, you and I (and Martindale) will drink the last bottle of wine in the cellar together! (Is there a bottle left?)"

His mirth rang out—the crackling of thorns. His eye danced more with a savage fire than with anything approaching gaiety.

"You laugh, my lord!"

The old butler stood stricken. How was it possible, his dim eyes seemed to ask, that this disgrace, that so cruelly crushed the servant, should but move the master to gibe? He lifted his hands and covered his ears from the sound.

"Better laughter than tears," said Wroth.

Bertram hung his head. Any personal shame or suffering would have been small to him compared to the falling of the house, under the great shadow of which his life had been spent. The shame of that placard on the hall door was like burning pitch upon his soul. As he turned to leave the room, his eye caught sight of a pile of letters lying unopened on the bureau. Among them were two or three conspicuously legal, heavily sealed, all addressed in the same clerk-like hand.

"Why, my lord," he scolded, with the familiarity of his long service, "Mr. Minchin's letters, and not one of them open! Ah, I was wondering that Mr. Minchin should let this come upon us!"

"What would all Chancery Lane do for me, you old numskull?" retorted Wroth in his good-humoured tone of banter, with its undercurrent of bitterness. "Minchin is not going to refill my money-bags out of pure devotion to the family! Here, bring the lot to me. They will help that green log to catch fire. Foh! don't I know his lucubrations? Grandpapa Baskerville's will and its damnable condition. Now, not a word! Ah, would you, you old villain? You have a brief from Minchin himself, I believe, to work the mission on me. I tell you, Bertram, I'll choose my own hell—I'll have nobody else's speciality for me. Out with you; there goes the hall door bell—don't you hear? More bumbailiffs. Give them beer, Bertram—give them the soothing hop."

He sat—the pile of dusty letters on his knee—watching the door close behind his servant's bowed figure. Then he sprang up, suddenly, tossing the missives right and left, and stood square in the hearth, his arms behind his back, his head thrown up.

"Mr. Minchin?" cried Bertram, as he drew open the hall door of Hurley Abbey. "Oh, Mr. Minchin, sir, you are indeed welcome! Sir, do you see what they have done?"

He pointed tragically to the notice which the bailiffs had now posted on a panel and were surveying with professional satisfaction.

"You rascals," cried the old man then, turning on them fiercely, emboldened by the unexpected appearance of the family lawyer, "how dare you defile a

nobleman's residence with your dirty bills? I'll tear that down before it has time to dry."

"Beware how you interfere with the proceedings of the law," said Mr. Minchin with a smile that had a knife-like edge. "But where is my lord? I must instantly speak with him. Nay, I have brought no luggage," he added, as the flustered and discomfited butler made a vague plunge towards the chaise. "My business with your master can take but little time."

He stood on the top of the granite steps, while his narrow eyes wandered a minute from the unkept drive across the wide park in its treeless desolation. It was a mild April day, all beauty and promise, but the young green of grass and sapling seemed only to emphasise the waste. No cattle on the thistle-grown pasture. No singing birds on the leafless land. Only a batch of crows circling over the fallows. Had the man of law been of imaginative disposition he might have found a fitting omen in their black swoop, their dismal cry. He shrugged his shoulders and turned briskly into the house.

"Mr. Minchin, my lord," announced Bertram, unable to keep the satisfaction from his voice.

"Damn!" said his lordship.

As Mr. Minchin stepped into the warm library, he removed the muffler which was wrapped round his throat, and allowed Bertram to possess himself of the many-caped coat which had protected his valuable person from the spring air. Then, folding the silken comforter with great deliberation, and scornfully ignoring his noble client's attitude of boyish sullenness, he began:

"My lord, not receiving any reply to my repeated communications to your lordship, I have deemed it my

duty to your late grandfather, worthy Mr. Baskerville——" He broke off, his small keen blue eye had fallen on the scattered letters at Wroth's feet. The acid smile twisted his lips. "I perceive the count you make of my efforts on your behalf, my lord," he wound up drily.

"Gad, but that won't prevent you charging for them, will it, Minchin?" retorted the graceless youth.

From other lips a speech of this kind would have been irrevocably offensive; but, reprobate as he was, there was something about the young man's smile as he spoke, about the glance of his brown eyes and the tone of his voice, that somehow robbed his outrageousness of offence. Instead of calling upon the retreating butler for his coat, and forthwith re-enveloping his throat in the kerchief, as he certainly would have done anywhere else in similar circumstances, Mr. Minchin placidly enough took a chair near the hearth and, stooping, began to pick up his own neatly sealed sheets from the litter of Lord Wroth's ignored courier.

He was a man still on the right side of fifty, of the type which, it would seem, only England breeds:—as arid as his own documents, yet drawn upon as rigid lines of honest purpose; impervious as the law itself to any appeal to sensibility, yet possessing a dry humour—saving touch, perhaps, without which he might have failed altogether to come into contact with his kind.

Imperturbably he examined the four neglected epistles. Each was neatly dated outside; he arranged them in order along his thin thigh; then cleared his throat and began, judicially:

"My lord, in this, my communication of March 2, I took upon myself to remind your lordship that the

time-limit for the fulfilment of the conditions in your maternal grandfather's will——"

"Hang my maternal grandfather's will!" interrupted the young man. "Cut that, Minchin; I know it's infernal ancient history."

The lawyer, from under his bushy eyebrows, shot a look at the scowling face above him. That glance, swift as it was, expressed a good deal—some contempt, dogged patience, a strong determination, withal that grain of amusement at the follies which were at once the props of his profession and its trials.

"Your lordship will allow me, nevertheless," pursued he, laying the letter in question upon the table by his side, "to proceed after the regular manner. This recapitulation is no doubt very wearying to the impatient spirit of youth. But it has its uses, my lord—it saves misunderstanding. My chaise is waiting," he added in another tone. "I do not propose to keep your lordship more than the briefest time possible; yet, till I have discharged my duty, I must trespass upon your lordship's hospitality,"

Lord Wroth flushed at the word.

"Gad, Mr. Minchin," he cried, "has not Bertram offered you even a glass of wine? You must forgive us. He's disturbed this morning, poor old fellow. And I—you know my ways—you found me in deep reflection."

Mr. Minchin deprecated the suggestion and arrested his host's movements towards the bell with two gestures of his grey hand. He was for the moment once more on the right side of his client, saw his opportunity, and was quick to take it. The grating voice was uplifted afresh:

"As executor of the late Mr. Baskerville's will, it is my duty to make a last effort; to place very clearly

once more before you the fact that unless you fulfil its chief condition, *videlicet*—take to yourself a wife before the date of your twenty-fifth birthday, the whole personalty of the Baskerville Estate, which otherwise would devolve on you, will pass to divers charities in the City of London—the Cutlers' Home for Orphans, the Foundling Hospital in St. Martin's, the Institution for Indigent——"

"Confound it, Minchin, stop that recitation. What the deuce do I care where the old fool's coin goes if it does not come to me?"

But the attorney proceeded, now placing the second letter on top of the first, methodically.

"In this letter I pointed out to your lordship that, aware of the enormous embarrassments which unfortunately encumber you at present, I was willing to advance to you any reasonable sum, provided your lordship undertook, on his honour, to qualify for his inheritance before it was too late."

"Did you, by George? Now, I call that clever of you, Minchin, confounded clever!" said Wroth; and his handsome, full lips curved into a sarcastic smile.

"In this third communication, my lord, I represented to you once more the full extent of the noble fortune you were jeopardising. Seven hundred thousand pounds, unquestionable securities. House property in the most remunerative sites in the City. Your late uncle's magnificent mansion in Finsbury——"

"Next-door neighbour to Alderman Butter, with a noble view of the conservatory of Snippe, late Snippe and Goose, the tailor!" interrupted Wroth with his mirthless laugh. "Truly an attraction, Minchin!"

"Nothing to prevent your lordship from disposing of the house to great advantage. And, doubtless, you would keep its contents, my lord? There are pictures,

some fine specimens of the Dutch school. The best silver, perhaps, in the City—a very remarkable library—Mr. Baskerville had traditions of taste. And your lordship is perhaps not aware that the cellars of my late revered friend were celebrated in a community that understands something of vintages?"

Wroth rolled the red fire of his eye gloomily upon him.

"The old devil knows, I believe," he said to himself, "that my burgundy is gone."

He took a few uneasy steps about the room, then flung himself into the great armchair opposite his visitor. Seizing a hunting-crop that had been flung on the side of the hearth, he began impatiently to tap one fine booted foot. Ever and anon his glance wandered to the dry face in front of him, with its puckered lines of sagacity, sarcasm, and determination. Some such glance might a savage hound throw at the man who was endeavouring to master him.

"In my fourth and last letter, my lord, despatched just seven days ago, I urgently recapitulated the situation once again, drawing your lordship's attention to the fact that on the nineteenth of this month—three days hence, my lord—your last chance will expire."

"'Pon my soul, Minchin," said the other irritably, "you're uncommon anxious for my welfare. Devilish altruistic, it strikes me. Is business profitable on those lines?"

Mr. Minchin's sharp smile reappeared.

"Let your lordship be reassured. In forwarding your lordship's interest I am forwarding my own. This principle is the foundation of every honourable fortune made in my profession, my lord. By the terms of Mr. Baskerville's will I am to keep the management of the estate—if it falls to your lordship. In the other

alternative everything passes from my control—a very serious loss of business. Mr. Baskerville had a very sound head, a very sound head."

Wroth sat forward in his chair, loosely holding the whip across his legs, and stared at the attorney. Then he suddenly broke into a laugh again—a laugh that now had a real boyish ring in it. Mr. Minchin's eyelids flickered faintly.

"Now, my lord, the extent of your lordship's embarrassments is well known——"

"Devil mend you!" growled the other; and the frown grew on his young brow again.

Up went the parchment-like legal hand:

"Pray, do not misunderstand me. I believe I can see things from your lordship's point of view. The shreds of the Wroth inheritance were hardly worth saving. In your position you were bound to get into difficulty in some few years. You, it is plain to see, preferred to precipitate matters, to enjoy these two or three years to the full rather than drag out a penurious existence which would lead to the same goal in the end. . . . Yet, that end once reached, I venture to presume that your lordship, with his peculiar views, would have an objection to seeking alliance with an heiress."

"No, damnation!" burst out the young man. "I'm no saint, but, gad, I'll not sell myself! It's useless, Minchin."

"Pray, pray, my lord, this was never a question of selling yourself. Your lordship had a free hand; could have chosen anyone he fancied, any of the charming young ladies who—surely your lordship must have met some one——" He broke off. An indescribable expression—a quiver, succeeded by a marble setting of the handsome features opposite him, warned him to desist.

"Some intrigue with a married woman," he said to himself cynically. "Well, well, it ought to facilitate matters at this crisis." Then aloud: "In present circumstances your lordship has just three days——" Mr. Minchin leant back in his chair, tilted his square, learned chin out of his stock, and stared at the ceiling; he joined the tips of his fingers, crossed his legs, and imparted a faint swing to one attenuated gaiter. "Matters are, of course, considerably different. Nevertheless, my lord, I see no reason why the—the—ah—why the necessary ceremony should not take place between your lordship and some lady or other." He let his finger slip and clasped his hands, ricked his thin frame into an erect attitude, and suddenly fixed his eyes upon his client. "There is nothing in the will," he said incisively, "to force your lordship to live with the person he marries."

Lord Wroth stared again; then his whole countenance lit up with fierce glee.

"Oh, Minchin, Minchin!" he cried. "*Vade retro, Satanas!* Tempt not mine innocency, thou evil one."

He broke off abruptly. A sudden rigidity seized him; his eyes became fixed, his face set into an expression of desperation. The attorney shot one glance and smiled; then he rose stiffly from his chair.

"Your lordship may safely leave all details in my hands. Pushed as we are, the matter presents considerable difficulties, difficulties that seemed insuperable, about which I had given up all hope; . . . but I think I have solved the problem." A dry chuckle shook him. "I may say I have solved the problem, but only after deep cogitation, and, I must add, with the prospect of peculiar inconvenience to myself. But since your lordship would do nothing to save himself, I have

thought it incumbent on me to take matters into my own hands."

Upon this cryptic utterance the speaker paused; then he added, in a businesslike tone:

"I understand I have your lordship's word that you will assist me in earnest through this matter? Very well. In that case I feel justified in leaving, for the use of your lordship, this trifling advance on account of the very important payments I shall have to make to your credit at the bank the day after the marriage is celebrated. I make bold to say that some ready money will not come amiss, given the circumstances, at the present juncture." So saying, he laid a pocket-book upon the table. "This, my lord," he went on, "contains three hundred pounds in Bank of England notes. And now I must return to town. I will take leave to present myself here to-morrow evening again, and assist your lordship with the necessary formalities."

As Mr. Minchin approached the door Wroth started.

"Eh," he ejaculated, "what?"

The lurid flame leaped back into his eyes. "Gad, 'tis the richest joke. Go in peace, man, go in peace, and bring your fallals, and deeds, and seals, and devil's dice to-morrow. Ahahaha!" His laughter rose loud, savage. He flung himself back in his chair, and shook with the violence of his fantastic humour.

"I have the honour to wish your lordship a good day," said Mr. Minchin very primly from the threshold. He bowed to the convulsed figure in the chair, and stepped out into the hall.

Old Bertram, bustling across the marble floor with a roll of brown paper in one hand, a large kitchen-cup in the other, paused. His meek, withered face, which had been pleasantly rosy, grew ashen.

"Lord save us, Mr. Minchin!" he exclaimed; "it is always bad hearing when his lordship laughs like that!"

"Pooh!" returned the lawyer, quite genially for him; "you may well all laugh to-day, for I make bold to say I am going to set the house of Wroth on its legs again. But his lordship is not easy to persuade, Bertram; and it will do no harm to let him contemplate the notice we wot of, and to be met now and again by the gentlemen who set it up, that he may meditate upon it all for the next day or so."

Bertram looked dubiously at the man of law. He was old, and he had been shaken. He was not quick to gather the meaning of hints or winks this morning. Now in his perturbation he actually forgot to help the visitor with his capes, but hurried out into the porch wagging his head and muttering to himself.

When the attorney had wrestled his rheumatic joints into his garments, he came out in his turn to find the old servant of Wroth busily pasting a sheet of brown paper over the placard that shamed the house.

"The law won't let us tear it down, but there's nothing against covering it up, sir, is there?" he quavered over his shoulder.

The lawyer chuckled as he hoisted himself into the chaise.

. . . . . .

Lord Wroth still lay in the armchair, just as the lawyer had left him. But his merriment had died out; his limbs hung limply, his head had fallen forward on his breast; there sat the image of a man brooding upon an evil perverse thought, fully recognised, yet accepted.

A sudden outburst of voices, a clatter of steps in the resonant hall without, roused him. He lifted his

head with a bitter smile; he knew what the bustle portended. The stone walls gave back shouts:

"William, you dog—my cloak!"

"*Sebastien, ma boîte à pistolets, n'oublie pas!*"

"Bertram, old fool, did I not tell you to order my horse?"

Here rose an indescribable clamour, such as breeds in a yard of excited poultry; a greasy voice, half-frightened, half-threatening, was interposing between volleys of oaths and asseverations: "Gentlemen, gentlemen—can't be done! The law's the law, gents!" Then a minute's cessation—a pause pregnant with fury and the greasy voice expostulating: "Oh, yes, gents, you are at liberty to depart. But no luggage, no cattle, no goods or chattels, you know!" Whereupon furious noise again—scuffling, hubbub, surging pandemonium, shrieks of mingled rage and pain, and over all Bertram's high-pitched objurgation: "Gentlemen! . . . for the Lord's sake, gentlemen!"

Wroth's smile broadened.

"They're murdering the bumbailiff!" he muttered, and made a languid effort to get up from his chair. He fell back again, however, as the door opened and two gentleman entered the room.

"Ha, Martindale," he exclaimed, his face lighting up. "Well, what's the to-do?"

"Oh, there's an impudent rascal there, Wroth, dear fellow, and they're merely locking him up in the gun-room!"

The first comer was a tall, fair youth, with a soft face, pink and white as a girl's—a pretty face with tiptilted nose and an indescribable impression of airy impudence. Behind him came a thick-set man, the natural scowl on whose countenance was now intensified by some inner heat of temper. He did not speak, but

stared angrily at his host from behind Mr. Martindale's slim figure.

Comparative peace had fallen in the hall without. Two or three valets passed and repassed the half-open door carrying luggage. Upon the gravel beneath the window there was a cheerful rhythm of hoofs.

"There they go!" proceeded Martindale, and took a few light steps forward. "My dear George, my very dear fellow, 'tis not the moment to tell you that I am distressed, heartbroken. I know how I can best prove my friendship—the warmth of my feelings for you! It is by relieving you of my company!"

Wroth changed colour. His countenance seemed to grow black under the cloud of anger that overspread it—if the word could apply to anything naturally so pale. His brows were drawn together, and beneath them his eyes shot red.

"You, Martindale?—you?" he exclaimed in a strangled voice, and tore at the stock round his throat.

"And you'll allow me to remark that you've played us a remarkably mean trick, Wroth," exploded the dark man. "Zounds, man, a fellow warns his friends; he does not let them be caught in his house and robbed of baggage and horseflesh. Devil, sir——"

"Pray, pray, Clifford . . ." interposed the airy Martindale. "Forgive him, George. Ever since this morning, when he found the champagne had given out—and he having anchovies!—his temper has been unfit for the Fleet—excuse the allusion, dear George, it slipped out——"

At this moment a large brindled hound thrust itself through the door, advanced sedately towards Lord Wroth and laid his great head on his knee. The young man shuddered, looked down at the beast, and the spasm of passion with which he had been contending

seemed to pass. He drew a long breath, the fine wings of his nostrils quivered, and that betraying mouth of his twitched:

"*Fidelitas* . . . thy name is dog, not man!"

Then he jerked back his head with the gesture characteristic of him, and looked boldly on his two guests. The one was all hovering anxiety to part in amity, the other still spoiling for his quarrel.

"A moment, Martindale," he said quietly enough, waving the fair youth's proffered handshake carelessly aside.

Then he rose from his chair, and, as he did so, the huge hound reared himself, flung his heavy paws upon his master's shoulder, and strove to reach his face with loving tongue. Wroth flung his arm about the creature, and, fondling it, turned his eyes again on Clifford. The latter quailed suddenly, and his face grew a mottled grey.

"Did I hear you calling anxiously for your pistol-case, Mr. Clifford?" inquired his host. ("Down, old Brutus, down!") "I trust, my dear sir, it has been recovered. Nothing like a puff of powder for clearing the air of—mean tricks, sir."

Mr. Clifford retreated two steps, suddenly pacified.

"You quite misunderstand," he stammered. "Upon my soul, Wroth, you do me wrong! I was speaking of your enemies, 'pon honour."

"Then, by the Lord, you're too damned difficult to understand!" cried Wroth, his fury leaping back. "Out of my room; out before I set Brutus on you! A man warns his friends, say you? You are warned!"

He stood a second breathing heavily; then the laughter which seemed to be his constant expression of emotion broke from him.

"Stay, stay, you, Martindale," he ejaculated between

the spells as both men made for the door. "Send your horse back to the stables, man—why, 'tis the best joke of the year! I've come into a fortune, my buck—seven hundred thousand. And the best cellar in the city! What say you to that? Call the others together. Our merry days are not done; they're but just beginning! Call the fellows, I tell you! The best is yet to come!"

The expression of Martindale's face, hesitating between suspicion and temptation, drove Wroth into a fresh convulsion. But the echoes of the ringing voice had reached the hall, and two or three heads were thrust curiously into the room.

"Gentlemen," said Wroth, composing his countenance, "unpack, unpack, for I'm a richer man than ever I was, and you're all my very dear friends again, are you not? Hitherto I've kept my counsel; but to-day, after such proof of devotion as you've all given me, gad, you shall share my secret as freely as hitherto my burgundy! I think I may be given the credit of having gone through a fair amount of folly, with your help, up to now. But I am going to crown this mad life with the maddest thing of all; I am going to be worth two-thirds of a million . . . and I am going to be married the day after to-morrow."

While he thus harangued his guests, with a kind of snarl in his voice, his hand was caressing Brutus's head tenderly.

CHAPTER VII

On the eve of that critical day, April 19, which was to see Wroth either finally ruined or once more a rich man, the lord of the Abbey sat at dinner with half a dozen friends. It was, as usual, a scene of hilarity. But despite Mr. Minchin's assurances, old Bertram, as he served them, had never known a heavier heart. For that bad laugh of his master rang out again and again. His companions, too, had inexplicable convulsions of mirth; some secret joke ran like wildfire about the table. Twice the lord of the Abbey hushed an indiscreet tongue; and the second time he had a jerk of his thumb, over his shoulder, towards Bertram himself. And Bertram had caught the words:

"Let him have his night's rest, dear old fool!"

"For sure, they're up to some dreadful prank," ran the tormenting thought under the white hair.

Wroth's red-brown eyes certainly avoided his old servant's anxious glances. And the bailiffs were still with them, squatting like toads in Bertram's own snug parlour, croaking of the fall of the house. And Mr. Minchin had given no fresh sign of life in spite of his promises; and to-morrow was the last day of grace.

Then came a rumble of wheels outside; then the hall door bell pealed, and Bertram's heart leaped to his throat. He glanced at his master.

Wroth was pouring himself a bumper, with a steady hand.

"Hark! I vow it's my Minchin at last," he cried, without interrupting his task. "He's bringing the handcuffs—and the key of them too. Invaluable person, my Minchin! Be quick, Bertram, we cannot allow such an important person to be received by the common footman."

"I am going, my lord, I'm going," murmured Bertram.

Wroth's laugh pursued him with its evil omen, as he hurried to the hall. Yet there was a gleam of consolation in the dark outlook: Mr. Minchin was the doctor of this death-sick house.

He unbarred the doors with hands that trembled in eager haste, and it was indeed Mr. Minchin's voice that greeted him from the depth of the hooded gig. But the voice was saying a most remarkable thing:

"Help the lady out, Bertram."

A lady—and brought by Mr. Minchin! His master stood alone in the world and there was none of the gentle sex near enough in kin, as the butler knew, for such a respectable person as the family lawyer to escort to this bachelor establishment.

Of course the old man was aware of the will and its conditions—the subject of Wroth's daily scoffs and gibes. That dead hand striving to control a living man's life with a bribe of gold, Wroth had struck it aside with a slap that echoed through the empty spaces of his falling house! Nevertheless the sands of salvation had not yet run out. A vague perception of possibilities was filtering to Bertram's confused wits as, in a fluster, he obeyed the lawyer's command.

A tall, substantial woman descended in silence. After her Mr. Minchin hopped down with remarkable jauntiness, in spite of his rheumatism.

"Come in, ma'am," cried Bertram, with increasing agitation, as she halted hesitatingly at the door.

He fell into fresh astonishment upon beholding the stranger in the light of the hall. A comely person in the pleasant thirties of her age, with a candid, round, rosy face, and innocent, frightened blue eyes. Her large, black poke bonnet was modestly tied under the chin by broad, silk ribbons. A grey Paisley shawl covered what seemed an agreeably buxom figure. As she caught the butler's eye widely fixed upon her, she sketched a curtsey. Altogether an ideal personality to grace the housekeeper's room; but in any other capacity. . . . Yet Mr. Minchin—and he was actually chuckling with something of the air of a raven intent on mischief—had just issued his next order:

"Show us to the library."

Bertram was sad at heart, oppressed with anxieties, worn out with futile efforts. Physical strength failed him to cope with the new difficulty. Why Mr. Minchin, in apparently the highest good humour, should arrive at this most critical moment, with a comely female of the domestic order, was a problem which he felt quite unable to tackle. It was with a toneless whisper and an expressionless eye that he informed his master that Mr. Minchin and a lady were awaiting his lordship in the library.

"A lady, by Jupiter!" ejaculated the young man, in unmistakable surprise. He rolled a hasty glance round the table, checked the words that were rising to his lips and, for a moment longer, sat in deep reflection. Then he flung back his head and broke as usual into mirth.

"The old fox!" he cried under his voice. "Oh, the old fox!" And then, loudly: "Keep the bottle

going, boys. I shall be back presently. My man of law waits me, anent that fortune you wot of."

He nodded as he spoke, and there was a howl of derision. Most of his good friends had their doubts about this same story of will and fortune. Wroth was a mad fellow who would have his joke to the last step of the scaffold; the bailiffs were still in Bertram's little room, and the afternoon's work at the Wells had gone beyond all previous flights of fancy. A temporary loan, a few more dozens in the cellar, a few more merry days — they had all come to believe the Abbey had nothing further to offer. And those who had no horseflesh to risk chose to remain on and see the last of old Wroth.

"He'll die game, anyhow," cried Martindale, as the door closed upon his host, and tipped a glass to the prince of practical jokers and the morrow's comedy.

"Hallo, Minchin," began Wroth jovially, as he opened the library door. But he halted on the threshold and his eye became fixed. Amazement, before which Bertram's surprise was as nought, blasted his countenance. Mr. Minchin's companion made her curtsey with a nice sense this time of a nobleman's superiority to a majordomo. Mr. Minchin himself rubbed his dry hands till they seemed to crackle with the laughter which his sharp, smiling lips refused to emit.

"Pray, my lord, excuse this late and unceremonious appearance. *Necessitas non habet leges*, or rather in most cases it is necessity that calls for the law—eh? And the law is a benevolent institution. More benevolent, my lord, and more elastic than any but her initiate realise. Mary Campbell, be seated . . . if you will permit, my lord."

Under the shadow of the poke bonnet, Mary Campbell's awe-struck orbs were fixed upon the lawyer's countenance, as you may see those of a performing dog upon his trainer.

"Yes, sir," she said, almost inaudibly, and took the edge of the nearest chair.

"May I suggest," pursued Mr. Minchin, masking some inner nervousness under an air of unnatural cheerfulness, "that your lordship take a chair likewise?"

Wroth, a point of gaiety piercing through his stupefaction, complied in silence. The lawyer then placed himself in a commanding position on the hearthrug between the two.

"First of all, my lord," he began, "one question. Has your lordship provided against to-morrow's indispensable ceremony?" Wroth repressed a start. "Your lordship is aware," explained Mr. Minchin, with his legal precision, "that a lady is a necessary party to every marriage, and that in cases where no banns have been published a license is likewise indispensable. If your lordship has already attended to these details I will ask you to allow Mary Campbell to retire, as her presence will become superfluous. Mine, I take upon myself to say, will still be useful to your lordship."

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Lord Wroth, in one of those sudden fits of black anger peculiar to him, "do you expect a fellow who is going to be hanged to engage his own hangman and supply his own rope?"

Mary Campbell, who at the lawyer's suggestion of retirement had half risen from her chair, remained paralysed in that attitude by the young man's tone.

"Be seated, Mary," said Mr. Minchin quietly. Then, turning to his noble client again: "I suspected

as much, my lord; forgive me for saying so," he remarked, "and therefore have taken the liberty of bringing with me to-night lady and license, both duly prepared against the ceremony——"

Lord Wroth's outburst of temper was replaced by fresh astonishment, rapidly succeeded in its turn by uncontrolled amusement. He flung himself back in his chair to laugh, reared himself again to stare at Mary Campbell, who dropped the huge poke bonnet in embarrassment and played with the tags of her reticule. Then he relapsed into new paroxysms.

"Pray, my lord," said Mr. Minchin, his nervousness betraying itself at last in a note of asperity, "extraordinary cases demand—ahem—extraordinary remedies. Your case, my lord, is extraordinary, and, pardon me for pointing it, desperate. I have devoted to it the most profound, the most anxious, I go so far as to add the most painful consideration. May I request your lordship to put some curb upon his mirth until I have placed before him the urgency of the situation on the one hand and its difficulties on the other. (Kindly cast your eyes on that clock, my lord, and count in how many hours you will be a beggar—and worse than a beggar—unless the conditions of your grandfather's will are fulfilled.)"

Laughter died upon Wroth's lips; he jerked his head at the threat. With men of his moods, a threat is the most fatal of arguments. While his silence permitted the lawyer to proceed, the setting of his lips, the fire in his eyes might well have conveyed a warning.

"Since it was established then, my lord, that you would leave the whole conduct of this affair to my care and judgment, I have endeavoured to find, and I believe successfully, a solution whereby the exact letter, if not the spirit, of the will can be fulfilled, with the least

risk and annoyance to yourself. It is idle to deny that in going against the spirit of your late lamented relative's testamentary provisions I am incurring a very grave moral responsibility, one which some might judge as altogether against the dictates of professional duty. Nevertheless, dealing with your lordship's peculiar circumstances, your lordship's peculiar views, I see my duty in another light. My duty is to save the honour of a noble house, the credit of an old name, a headstrong and foolish young man from irretrievable ruin . . . at all costs my lord, at all costs!"

The dry voice had risen to almost passionate sonority. Mr. Minchin paused, with grey hand uplifted, not unimpressive in his earnestness.

"Gad," exclaimed Wroth, teasingly, "you've mistaken your vocation, Minchin. You should be at the bar; what a pleader you'd have made. You'd have judge and jury in tears."

"My lord," said Mr. Minchin, with his knife-like smile, "you are right; I need not have wasted time in explaining to you motives for what might seem an unscrupulous action. Briefly, my lord, all I can do for you at this juncture is to enable you to enter into the possession of a magnificent fortune, with the least possible threat of trouble to yourself. To this end the person who is to go through the marriage ceremony with you must be one who will not abuse the situation, firstly, by insisting upon all her rights as your wife—hush, my lord, pray!—secondly, by demanding a monstrous amount of money from you as the price of her compliance with an irregular position; thirdly and equally important, she must be one who can be trusted never to drag your name into notoriety by any act of her own. In short, my lord, the woman I had to find was to be respectable, disinterested, discreet—she was

to be willing to aid you, in your necessity, for no ulterior purpose of her own. Naturally a competence would have to be settled upon her. A modest competence, that is understood"—the lawyer's finger went up—"she and I are agreed upon the figure. And this lady——"

Wroth's glance pierced across the room towards the bonnet which had dropped more than ever during the exposition.

"And is this lady," he asked, "willing, out of pure philanthropy, to sacrifice herself to my necessity, without any further return than the competence, the modest competence, you mention?" His accents were openly sarcastic. "I may be forgiven if, in a wicked world, I should like to have some further information concerning such a paragon."

"My lord," said the lawyer curtly, "there was but one woman in the world whose worth I have sufficiently tested to be able to trust in so delicate a situation. Mary Campbell has been in the service of my house all her life practically; she is the one honest woman I have ever known. She is the one grateful person I have ever known. She is now my housekeeper and"—an unexpected note of tenderness crept into Mr. Minchin's voice—"the best cook I have ever known."

At the first mention of her name by her master, Mary Campbell had risen from her seat and, at every fresh encomium she had dropped him a curtsey. Leaning forward, grasping the arms of his chair, Wroth shot quick glances from one to the other. A little flirting flame from the hearth, as it rose and fell, alternately lit up, or threw into capricious shadows, his countenance. His lips were folded upon the merriment that shook him; every feature of his face commented in

dumb eloquence upon Mr. Minchin's speech. At the last eulogy bestowed upon the would-be Lady Wroth he gave a sudden gasp. Up went Mr. Minchin's hand, up his voice, harshly domineering:

"One final word, my lord! Mary Campbell exactly understands the situation. She is prepared to go through the ceremony with you, and to return to my establishment and resume her usual avocation; you would never hear of her again unless you desired it. She is satisfied with the yearly allowance, three hundred pounds, which I propose you should settle upon her. With regard to your lordship's recently expressed doubts as to Mary Campbell's disinterestedness in the question, I must reassure your lordship. She is not acting from any sense of foolish altruism, she is acting by my instruction and influenced by no other feeling than by that of respect for, of confidence in myself, her master. And being a person of strong common sense, with no aspirations towards a life in wedlock, she recognises an opportunity of ensuring to herself a comfortable income without any responsibility or discredit, or personal inconvenience. Hush, Mary Campbell!"

Wroth sprang to his feet. His mood had once more changed. The amusement was swept from his face by a new sullen cloud. He flung himself upon the poker and stirred the embers, so that a ruddy glow streamed into the room and drove the haunting shadows aside.

"You are too damnably managing, Minchin!" he cried. "Keep your cook for your own hashes." He paused a second and glared, a sudden loathly suspicion leaping into his mind. Could the wily attorney have any ulterior purpose in the pensioning off of this comely domestic?

But the doubt fled as quickly as it had surged. One glance at the honest, abashed countenance under the poke bonnet was sufficient. Her eyes were round and frightened, as innocent as a child's or an animal's.

"'Pon my soul, Minchin!" he exploded again, "you are a cold-blooded one to drag this creature into our tangles! Gad! since to the devil I must, I'll go to the devil my own way. Pshaw! and all said and done, I've got a better joke even than yours. Get you to supper with Bertram, my good woman!"

Mr. Minchin's countenance lost the expression of absolute triumph which it had come to wear during the exposition of his unimpeachable scheme.

"What am I then to understand?" he stammered, more discomfited perhaps than he had ever known himself in the whole of his experience.

"Understand this," said Wroth, "I am not going to marry that woman. I don't care whom I marry; but I won't have that honest thing with her frightened eyes dragged into this against her will—against her will, I say, Minchin." His voice rang out imperative. There was kindness in his glance for her if his tone was fierce. Then his reckless humour rose again: "And you don't know my plan yet." He slapped the furious lawyer on the back. "Gracious heavens, have the dreary parchments and the dry bones of the law driven all humour out of you? Why, your scheme was duller than death, man. Wroth married to his lawyer's housekeeper! Not a spark about the business, not a redeeming risk, not even the sporting uncertainty of chance to give a fellow an interest! Gad, Mrs. Mary Campbell, ma'am, since you are so good a cook, you know better than to spoil a dish for want of salt."

"Mary Campbell," interrupted her master sepulchrally, "you can leave the room."

Wroth stepped to the door, part mocking, part benevolent:

"You'll find my old Bertram in the hall there," he said cheerfully, and added under his breath: "Don't be afraid, ma'am, you'll not have to marry me to-morrow."

She curtseyed again, still speechless; but the round eyes were full of gratitude.

"By Jupiter!" cried Wroth, his back against the door, his voice ringing out uproariously: "Not one word from beginning to end. Devil, man, a silent woman with all the other virtues to boot! A pearl! Why don't you marry her yourself?"

"Lord Wroth," said Minchin, holding out a sheet of parchment and tapping it threateningly; "without this license, since there is no other provided, you cannot be married to-morrow. It is in your name and that of Mary Campbell. You decline to marry Mary Campbell. You have informed me you intend to go to the devil your own way. That way is but too clearly indicated. And—and—in short, my lord, I wash my hands of your affairs."

"Not a bit of it, Minchin," said Wroth, seating himself astride a chair as he spoke, and over the back of it glancing tauntingly at the lawyer. "Not a bit of it. I am going to be married to-morrow. I don't yet know to whom. That's where the sport comes in. And the marriage has to be made legal, license or no license. That is where you come in, you see. Just take the lamp over to the writing-table, you will find a certain placard on it. That placard will be posted on the Pantiles, at Tunbridge Wells, early to-morrow morning. It explains itself. You can give me your opinion on its contents when you have perused and digested them. Hush, Mr. Minchin! It would surely

be most unprofessional to deliver a legal opinion without deep consideration. Good-night! Bertram will show you a room."

A couple of hours later Wroth stood in the great hall, watching the last figure of his cup companions disappear up the stairway, candle in hand. A sneer was on his lips as he marked light and shadow leap against the panels with each lurch of unsteady progress. When, from the vast corridor, the slam of the closing door came echoing, he drew a deep breath of relief, and seemed, as an actor steps wearily from his part, to cast from him the whole character he had assumed that night, to the very expression of his countenance. He was no longer mad Wroth, the gay buck, the reckless jester, the profligate. He was a haggard man facing the tragedy of his life.

He remained a minute or two absorbed in reflection, absently patting the head of dog Brutus, who stood gravely by his side, with eyes of patient expectation raised to his master's face. Then, sighing again, he took the lamp left on the table, the sole remaining light amid the shadows of the hall, and turned towards the long vaulted passage that belonged to the older part of the house and led to the monastery church. For it was to the ruined church that his tormented spirit was driven, there to spend the last hours he had left himself before bidding an eternal adieu to his secret ideal.

He entered its whispering silence, its high mysterious gloom, as Romeo may have entered into the tomb of Juliet. Casting a small circle of light about himself as he went, he stepped into the old sanctuary and paused at the altar table, where he set down the lamp. There was the chair she had sat in, here the place where she had laid her folded ivory hands. He flung himself on

his knees and clasped the carven throne that had held her. A groan escaped his lips, repeated in faint sighs from the arched deeps about him.

Juliana—farewell! Unknown to him but for this single liquid name, she had come and gone in the night like some dream vision; yet he had recognised his soul's mate and he was about to place between her and himself the irreparable barrier. It was worse than self-destruction, it was the suicide of all that was high, all that was noble in him; it was soul murder!

He dragged himself to his feet to stand again on the spot where he had drunk to his spiritual union with her as in a cup of votive wine. How she had looked on him, the moment before he fell, with grave, pitiful, purple eyes! Oh, what a love hers might have been, the woman of strong silence, the woman of such rare words of music! "Our spirits married, then, though I go to the nethermost pit, and nothing can kill that memory in me." Why had he not died as he lay at her feet? Euthanasia—a glorious passing, intoxicated with the red wine that sang of a passion beyond his dreams!

Restlessly he went back to the chair, and, casting himself upon it, bent to kiss the desecrated altar-stone where her touch had rested. By this kiss he bade his dream good-bye. Had it been upon her dead lips it could scarcely have been the expression of a deeper renunciation.

Leaning his chin on his clenched hands he gazed down into the gloom of the nave where every moment some fresh spring of arch, some exquisite piece of tracery, arose into life for the eye accustomed to the darkness. He conjured her up before him—the night of her hair, the wondrous pansy-violet of her eyes, the warm ivory of her cheek, the black of her dress, the

purple of her cloak, and those exquisite pale hands. Black, purple, and white—for ever would those colours be consecrate for him, hold her for him as in a chord of music, even as for the love-singer of Vaucluse, all lovely greens and violets held his Laura.

He caught his fancy back as it circled. What right would he have to these high memories of love, who to-morrow would mock all love's sacredness in the most sordid union ever devised? Well, since it was to be, it could never be sordid enough, could not too openly blazon to the world that it was nought but a mummery of contract; that if Wroth was selling himself and his honour he gave but his name as the price. The world could never too clearly know that none more contemned the bargain than himself.

What kept him from the thought of self-destruction in that hour? Perhaps it was hope which could not quite die in a frame so instinct with vitality, so pulsing with passion; perhaps the whole character of the man which was, in extremity, to play the defiant rather than the yielding part.

Wroth was still very young; and he shared with all wild youth that kind of perversity of honour which makes a rash vow the more coercive because of its extravagance. He never for an instant, even in this hour of miserable self-communion, wavered in his purpose; less, indeed, because of the money necessities which pressed so heavily upon him, but because of his undertaking with his friends, his boast of coming wealth in face of their desertion, because of the pride that irked him till the fulfilment of the mad freak already started to their applause.

His lamp, which had long been flickering and waning unperceived, suddenly shot a more vivid flame, like a dying man's last sigh, and expired. And then

he perceived that the dawn had begun to creep on the world without. Grey and sad, it was stealing in through the church windows, colder it seemed than the night, more dimmed with shadows.

It was as if the sickly light stirred into motion all the hidden ghostly presences that haunted the church. Shadows moved from pillar to pillar trailing intangible robes; the sighs, the whispers with which the inner silence was always haunted, pressed not louder but indefinably multiplied upon the ear.

"It is the day," said Wroth. He rose from the Abbot's chair, and stood looking at the extinguished lamp. "Farewell, Juliana."

Then he smiled farewell, too, on the self that might have been, on the Wroth that was for Juliana and the better things. "Lie there, my might-have-been, amid the dead monks; none shall disturb your tomb!"

CHAPTER VIII

WHY her lady, hitherto the most reasonable of women, should have conceived the sudden freak of coming all the way to England, for the purpose, ostensibly, of taking the waters at Tunbridge Wells, was a matter for endless conjecture to Mrs. Panton.

It had been understood from the beginning that the first year of widowhood should be spent in Italy. The winter had gone by very comfortably in the Florentine palace. Florence was at its most beautiful in the spring. All the society with which the Countess Mordante was accustomed to commingle was there. In England, albeit her own land, there was scarce a house where she was known.

As for the waters, Panton could not see that her ladyship was in any need of such treatment; she had bloomed like a rose since the old Count's death. And that Wells should be chosen, the place near which they had been overtaken by that dreadful adventure, the very mention of which was forbidden to the garrulous maid. At this point of her cogitations Panton would invariably be brought up by a singular doubt. Yonder wild young lord, mad and bad as he was, there had been something about him! Yes, there had. Could it be possible? Never! Did she not know her lady? Did she not know her high aloofness? Well, well, in Tunbridge Wells they were again, be it as it may.

"A singular place for your ladyship to choose!"

"Why, Panton? These are bright, fresh rooms, and the people seem civil."

"Too civil by half, my lady. We'll have it in the bill."

Juliana smiled. She was accustomed to her woman's cheerful pessimism, which was not without its humour.

"A lot of fast, low fellows there are about. Some one will be running away with your ladyship again. And she a widow now!" said Mrs. Panton.

"I think not," said Juliana.

She was sitting before her mirror, while the woman put the finishing touch to her coronet of dense black hair.

"Speaking of that, my lady, there's mighty gossip about that wicked nobleman at the Abbey—begging your ladyship's pardon for referring to a subject which it is your ladyship's wish I should never mention."

Panton's eyes were boringly fixed upon the reflection in the mirror. A colour, no deeper than the flush of a sea-shell, had risen to Juliana's cheeks. The heavy lids were raised suddenly. The pansy-purple eyes completed an image of extraordinary harmony; no other colour could have fitted so well the dark hair and the white skin.

"It seems, my lady," pursued Mrs. Panton, with a ponderous airiness, "that he has ruined himself entirely, and the bailiffs are in the place."

Juliana rose abruptly.

"My dress and my cloak; I am going out."

"Going out, your ladyship, before the day's warm?" And you coughing twice last night! As sure as my name is Louisa Panton you will be for a hectic, and——"

"Tush!" interrupted her mistress. "I am here

for the waters, and the first glass must be taken fasting."

"The waters! I never thought your ladyship was in earnest about the drinking of that nasty stuff. Poison it is to some constitutions, my lady. There was my cousin's brother-in-law, that died sudden, after two glasses, and him only just finished a hearty dinner of——"

Juliana, with the purple eyes fixed on space, stood unheeding the good woman's babble. She absently allowed herself to be robed in long clinging folds of widow's black.

"My hat; my veil."

"As for me," asserted Mrs. Panton, bustling, "I'm quite prepared to go the same way, if your ladyship won't listen to reason."

"I don't expect you to drink the waters," said Juliana, with her slight smile, rousing herself from her abstraction, "but get your bonnet, woman, and come with me."

"I hope I know my duty," said Mrs. Panton enigmatically; "and my pattens, too, since the inners is my weak point."

Early as it was, there were already two or three loungers on the hotel steps. One raffish-looking individual, with broken hunting-boots and a straw in his mouth, stopped in the middle of some humorous story to stare at the tall black figure.

"That's a tidy filly and a neat stepper!" he exclaimed admiringly. He broke into insolent laughter at Mrs. Panton's furious glance.

"Hey, my beauty," he cried after her as she passed him, clattering in her mistress's wake, "there's a chance for you! See Lord Wroth's placard on the Pantiles? Go quick and buy a new bonnet."

The other men burst into gross cachinnations. Mrs. Panton was astounded to see her mistress suddenly halt, turn, and retrace her steps.

"Of what are you talking, sir?" asked Juliana, addressing the first man. He drew himself together with an uneasy attempt at gentility, and tossed the straw out of his mouth.

"It is but the latest lark of Lord Wroth's, ma'am," he answered obsequiously; "but the Wells is in an uproar about it. But, bless you, ma'am, I've some slight acquaintance with his lordship myself,"—here he took two steps forward, his tone grew more familiar —"and I can assure you, ma'am, this here is just another of his hoaxes—Wroth, you see."

"Thank you," interrupted Juliana. "On the Pantiles, you say? No doubt I shall find it. Good morning."

"Gad, that's a highflyer!" said the man, swaggering back to his companion, proud of having been thus distinguished. "Come, boys, the bar's open."

The air was full of the exquisite freshness of a spring morning. It had rained in the night, and the cobble-stones were still wet. The sunshine lay in yellow streaks glistening; the shadows were the shadows of a bright day, blue, with the light in them. The little town nestled all smiling against the amethyst mists of the hills, framed in young green of woodland. Small squares of gardens showed nodding daffodils, rich yellow crocuses, bushes of budding wallflower. On the pleasant tartness of the breeze floated odours of all the spring-growing things, as well as of the homely wood smoke of the enkindled hearths; the good aroma of a bakery filled a whole street. It was a morning to inspire the joy of life.

Juliana quickened her pace. The Pantiles were still but sparsely attended by visitors. It was not yet

eight o'clock, but any one who knew the ways of the quiet little Spa might have noticed an unusual animation among the rare passengers who paced the parades. Towards the middle of the walk a group was stationary before a certain pillar, constantly adding to its numbers, with much buzzing and pushing as of bees on the swarm. With unhesitating step Juliana approached. The throng was too dense for her to reach the pillar, but she could see that it was indeed a placard which excited so much attention.

It was the humbler class of townsfolk that seemed attracted by the novelty; and rough jokes, intermingled with some angry remarks, much laughter and a little indignation, were bandied about among them.

"Lord Wroth, again!"

"It could only be from his lordship."

"Another of the Hurley Burley tricks!"

"Him! If he'd pay the money he owes all over the town, and not bring scandal upon it, it would be more becoming his lordship's place."

This last remark from a respectable-looking townsman.

"What good ever came out of Wroth?" retorted an old man beside him.

"I'd like to have a few words with him!" cried a weedy and excited youth, with long hair falling on a green stock, "making game of our ladies like this!"

A shout of laughter greeted the remark.

"And much would be left of you afterwards, Mister Hilary? Your own mother wouldn't know you again if Wroth had half a minute's handling of you!"

A couple of boys were dragging a flashy wench through the little crowd.

"Now, Sal, I'll be your ladyship's best man," jeered one.

"And don't forget me at Hurley Burley," implored the other with burlesque sentimentality.

"I daresay there'll be a knifeboy's place wanted," retorted the drab.

Amid the fresh mirth evoked by this sally Juliana suddenly uplifted her voice—

"Let me pass, please."

Her high-bred accent, her tone of command, produced an instant effect. All turned to look at her. With sudden movement she flung back her veil, and the sight of her face confirmed the impression. Instinctively everyone fell back before her. "Make way for the lady. Let the lady pass," went from lip to lip.

It was partly because of her beauty, perhaps, partly because of her fearlessness, but beyond this there was something commanding in her presence which she hardly realised herself. Where she chose to order Juliana was always obeyed. She advanced and stood to read, Mrs. Panton at her elbow:

> *Lord Wroth, finding himself in impoverished circumstances, desires to mend his fortunes by matrimony.*
>
> *Any tender-hearted females feeling disposed to take compassion upon him may present themselves in the Commercial Room of the New Inn and Tavern, between nine and ten, on Thursday morning, April 25, when he will make his selection, and thereafter espouse the person selected according to all legal rites. Lord Wroth reserves to himself absolutely the right of choice.*

Juliana read, and it seemed to her that her blood, just now so richly stirred in spring joy, suddenly congealed in her veins.

"It could only be Wroth," had been the first exclamation she had heard, and her mind had confirmed it. No hoax, but Wroth himself, at his worst. Here was the act of the mad master of Hurley, the leader of the monks' revel, of him who had hounded wolf and bear on his friends. But the Wroth whose memory had been dwelling with her, whom she—still in early widowhood—had come to seek, because she believed his heart was crying out for her, as hers for him; because she believed in his deep need of her; Wroth of the wounded soul, who had poured his yearnings into her ear—what of him?

She felt as she gazed on the ignoble placard, as if the hand that had once so chivalrously refrained from even touching hers had now been lifted to strike her in the face. In thus scoffing at womanhood he had insulted her.

She turned and blindly made her way back through the gaping spectators. As she passed the girl, still hanging on the arm of either admirer, the creature called out insolently:

"Well, miss, I suppose you'll be up to time. We'll meet at the New Inn, by-and-by, I have no doubt."

Juliana turned her eyes, dark with passion and sorrow, upon the poor bold piece of prettiness. Then she drew her veil swiftly over her face once more to hide the overwhelming tide of blood that had rushed to it.

CHAPTER IX

An hour later, unaccompanied this time, Juliana found her way to the New Inn and Tavern in the Lower Walk by the Pantiles.

Through the thick folds of her concealing veil she stood gazing dreamily on the dingy walls, the spare fittings of the Commercial Room which, as announced, had been retained that morning for Lord Wroth and his company.

Afterwards she could recall every detail, every setting of that scene in which her life's drama was decided. The sullen little fire, blowing spiteful puffs of smoke into the room at every fresh gust of April wind; the yellow wainscot, the blackened ceiling; the fly-spotted coloured prints; the window bow that jutted upon the parade, and the curious heads pressed against the pane to gaze in upon her and the other women. Those other women! She could not sit in such companionship; so she stood. She stood rigid against one of the dusty curtains, her black cloak flowing to her feet, closely. She was gathering its folds together with those of her impenetrable lace veil across her breast with a hidden clasp. Beneath this hand her heart beat in hard, heavy strokes. Sickening in her nostrils was the stale smell of the room; now and again a wave of patchouli, started by some sudden movement of one of those others, would mingle with

the reek of fire-smoke and the stagnant reminiscence of spirit and tobacco.

Curious glances were cast upon her from the little group of four that sat round the fire. There was a large woman—a widow like herself apparently—with a deep bonnet and a flounce of lace hanging from it that did not conceal a certain florid elderly comeliness. Her large hands folded over a white handkerchief bore traces of hard work. Juliana wondered vaguely what should bring her among the aspirants.

Beside her the damsel of the patchouli required no such elucidation. Her bold roving eye, her rouged cheek, spoke for her. Then there was a foolish, wholesome-looking, country lass in terror at her own daring, and a thin female of the genteel description, with "crazy old maid" heralded in every dangle of ill-assorted ribbon, in every tangle of attenuated curl. This poor lady had a reticule, and minced a good deal with its contents.

Juliana's womanly heart, of a sudden, stirred within her. For the sake of their common sisterhood she would have liked to take that good-natured elderly widow by the hand and lead her forth before she exposed her honest tale of wife and motherhood and toil to ridicule and shame; to have sent the silly round-eyed wench home, with her ears tingling, to her butter-making; aye, and to have shielded the poor old spinster and her pathetic folly from the glance of mocking eyes. As for the other creature, Juliana's eye hardened as it recognised her. It was the presence of such as she that at once justified her own inconceivable action in her eyes for his sake, and to her own pride utterly condemned it.

No one spoke; there was that sense of gloomy

lassitude and apprehension about them all that marks the miserable gathering in the doctor's anteroom. The widow sighed ponderously at rhythmic intervals. The girl of the patchouli yawned with ostentation; but, except for her first insolent crow of laughter at sight of Juliana's black figure, she seemed to have lost all jauntiness. The ancient spinster fiddled, fluttered, and simpered. The farmer's daughter started at every noise, and bit a trembling lip; tears grew and waned in her silly blue eyes.

Outside, the scoffing group of spectators increased, their laughing voices penetrated to the room. Now the sky grew rapidly dark, and a scurrying April shower sent them hustling each other into the inn porch. Two or three ragged women were driven down the street by a constable; such candidates the tavern-keeper took upon himself to exclude from a meeting which, on the whole, was drawing much enviable and lucrative attention to his house.

Presently, into the dreary waiting crept a flutter; the tension grew to throbbing. Juliana closed her eyes involuntarily against the vision of that face which she knew would strike her afresh into sorrow—alas, and into joy more cruel than sorrow! But the tiptoe of expectation fell flat: here was but another sister courting Folly, tempting Fate.

Juliana's gaze widened. She had to restrain an impulse to cast the dimming veil from her. The newcomer was tall, slender, and alert; she carried about her an air of fashion and entered with an assurance of step and mien singular, indeed, in the circumstances. Veiled as thickly as Juliana herself, the sweep of hanging white lace was yet folded so coquettishly round the large curving hat with its black and white plumes that it was clear here was one challenging curiosity rather

than seeking disguise. The folds of the bright blue velvet mantle were not meant to hide completely the delicate line of bust, the charming poise of waist and hip to which the close robe beneath gave full value.

She walked with a swing which made the china-headed cane she carried a mere accentuation of mode. A bunch of primroses tucked beneath the lace that just covered her chin gave the last touch to her air of fashionable lady bent on frolic—a lady? There were rings enough under the loose glove of the hand that brandished the cane; there was elegance enough about the garments, and richness, assurance and audacity enough about her mien. Yet Juliana knew one who was no lady, and whom the newcomer's gait irresistibly recalled. She looked upon her with rising dismay.

The brilliant candidate halted an instant at the head of the table, flung a comprehensive glance through her mechlin at the row by the fireplace, bowed her plumed head, and a faint impertinent laugh rippled out from the hidden lips. Then she turned and surveyed Juliana.

At the first note of that laughter Juliana knew beyond doubt. Rivals again! she thought. And she rebelled at the hideous irony of fate. Waves of hot suspicion swept over her, quickly followed by cold disgusts. She remembered the plot of the mock kidnapping—into what a tangle had she thrust herself! How could her foot venture into such slime? Yet something stronger than pride, fiercer than jealousy, held her to her purpose. Sternly, behind her veil, she fixed the gaudy butterfly, and felt how its gay and confident mood was suddenly struck cold by her own black rigidity. The two women through their disguises met each other's invisible gaze. Then, after a space of

vain wrestling as with one stronger than herself, the owner of the plumed hat tossed it again, and, marching to the opposite corner of the window, took her station there, right hand outflung, resting on the cane, little sandalled foot advanced waiting for victory.

The sun had flashed out again between rifting clouds and was bright on the wet street, when a clatter as of a cavalcade halting, accompanied by laughter and high voices, announced from without, this time unmistakably, the arrival of the bridegroom.

Juliana saw the stir run among her companions; saw a conquering tilt of the feathered hat and a bracing of the elastic figure under the blue velvet cloak; saw the more anxious airs of preparation which shook the other four as they rose, almost simultaneously, from their seats. She herself moved not by so much as a sigh; she felt as if even her heart had stopped beating.

The door was flung back and he came in, some paces in advance of his friends, as a prince of the blood before his retinue. With a free step he entered and, meeting the sunshine that streamed in through the window, his pale face seemed to become luminous, his chestnut hair afire.

"Ah me!" thought Juliana in her grave heart, "he steps to degradation as to a dance."

Enshrined in her memory was his image, alternately fierce, passion-pale, exalted; not thus, breathing insolent gaiety from laughing lips, with brilliant cold eyes, mocking his own manhood and all womanhood together, in a single evil pleasantry. Something began to lament within her as with slow tears, like stealthy bleeding. She had dreaded the joy of seeing him again—behold it was all pain!

A gust of spring airs burst with him into the stagnant room. His friends, three in number, gathered about the threshold. One of them, a young fair man whom she remembered, propped himself against the door-post, consumed by his sense of the situation's exquisite humour.

"Gad!" cried another, after a comprehensive glance, "a poor field, lad! There's no run on the stakes—a beggarly half-dozen entries." His eye fell on the widow. "The old mare herself, by George! A green colt, and——" His scrutiny passed from the farmer's daughter to the spinster, and, seized with uncontrollable merriment, he flung himself against the fair youth, clutching and shaking him in kindred paroxysms.

The third man bore an imperturbable countenance. He held a notebook in one hand, a pencil aloft in the other. His eyes wandered solemnly, awaiting events.

Wroth had halted but for a second in the middle of the room, and like lightning his gaze had swept round it. Then, after glancing once or twice keenly at the two figures in the window, he turned his back upon them, and resting his knuckles lightly upon the table, addressed the group by the hearth in tones of bantering peremptoriness:

"Come, mesdames, line up, line up! How can a man judge of your points if you stand huddled together there? Martindale, set the ladies against the wall, there's a good fellow."

"Don't presume to lay a hand on me, young man!" said the widow, goaded to sudden fury, as, detaching himself from his companion, the fair boy advanced with great airiness. She backed indignantly against the wainscot, and turned her empurpled countenance upon Wroth.

Placing his hand upon Martindale's shoulder, Wroth gravely surveyed her for some seconds. Then said he:

"Ma'am, if I took wife by avoirdupois, no doubt you would romp in—easy first. But the weight of my misfortune is already too great. I appreciate your benevolent purpose, but must respectfully decline."

"Well, I declare——!" cried the matron, gathering her garments about her; then she broke into inarticulate threats and ejaculations, stormily making for the door. Yes, to be sure! Hoaxing respectable females! She'd have the law of him, lord or no lord!

No one heeded her, except the laughing gentleman, who laughed the more, and the grave gentleman with the pencil, who, now following Wroth with burlesque solemnity step by step, wrote in his notebook: "Fat widow—scratched."

Without, a burst of cheers greeted the first of the rejected.

Before the country wench, who was so overcome that she could not raise her eyes from the floor, Wroth paused a longer time, surveying in silence. Then he drew a gold piece from his waistcoat pocket and pressed it into the cold red hand.

"Go and buy ribbons, child," he said, not unkindly, "and make yourself smart for next Sunday's walk with Jock or Joe, or whatever the lucky lad's name may be."

"Green filly—scratched," was the next entry in the notebook.

The girl flung the gold piece on the ground, burst into the loud weeping of her class, and plunged from the room. There was a second salvo of jeers from

outside. Wroth's face grew black with his sudden frown.

"Shut the door, there!" he thundered.

He had come before the spinster. Martindale gave a boyish giggle, and the last in the row, she of the reddened cheek and the roving eye, looked at him and then at her rival, and guffawed. Wroth's hawk eyes flashed from one to the other. Then, bowing low, he addressed the pitiable wreck of womanhood and gentility in tones of courtesy:

"Believe me, madam, I am honoured and touched by your confidence. But I should be taking an unworthy advantage of it were I to allow you to proceed any further with your generous intention. Martindale," he cried sharply, "give your arm to the lady and lead her out of this."

The young man flushed like a girl.

"Gad, Wroth, what a fellow you are for ordering one about!" he muttered.

"Nay, I know how I can ever rely on your friendship," returned Wroth pleasantly.

Flushing still deeper at the taunt, Martindale extended an ungracious arm to the poor old spinster. She would have delayed, protested. She was lifting thin mittened hands in assurance of her willing sacrifice. But her moment had already passed; the bridegroom had turned away, and a third entry had been made in the note-book. Wroth now stood by the table, his eyes fixed upon the black veiled figure.

The last of the row, who had been confidently awaiting scrutiny, waited yet a little while, unable to grasp the fact that she had been passed over. No sooner did it dawn upon her, however, than she advanced brazenly and flipped him on the shoulder with her scented handkerchief.

"Your lordship has not looked at me!" she cried.

"My dear," said Wroth briefly, "you've already been too much looked at."

"Well, I declare——" exclaimed the girl, even as had the matron before her. She stood staring till the full bearing of the words reached her slow mind. Then even her hardened face grew scarlet.

"Any other gentleman on the marrying tack this morning?" she cried, fleering, to hide her mortification. "No——? I'm truly surprised. I'll waste no more time here."

She wheeled about, tripped on the gold piece, stooped and snatched it up with a laugh. As she was passing out, sped by a flourish from the humorist at the door, she crossed Martindale hurrying back, and paused a second in a last futile endeavour to gain attention.

"Warned off the field," wrote Wroth's sporting friend, folded the notebook, and dangled it behind his back. It was now even running between the two veiled figures.

"Martindale," said Wroth beneath his breath, "look at that black creature beyond! Is there not something sinister, unnatural about it? I felt a chill strike from her. By the lord, I felt it all down my back from the instant I came into the room."

Martindale rolled his blue eyes and endeavoured to give to his pretty, impudent face an air of profound sagacity.

"Gad, she is black! Aye, and still!" he added, struck suddenly in his turn by the dark immobility.

"Black," echoed the other, "and still? There's something unnatural about her, I tell you. She gives

out cold. It's death or fate, or conscience embodied." Then, meeting the other's astounded glance: "Bah, what a fool I am to talk to you!" he cried. "I'll to the bottom of it, I'll see what is under that shroud, be it a death's head."

He took a stride forward.

"Up with that veil," he ordered harshly. Laughter ceased in the room. There was a stir of eager curiosity.

"Up with your veil," repeated Wroth with a passionate stamp.

Juliana stood as if turned to marble. If her life depended upon it, she could not have obeyed that order.

"Speak then!" continued the young man, his strange anger growing. He waited a breathless moment.

"I think it is only fair his lordship should see the would-be bride. Gadzooks, we are not in Turkey here!" cried Martindale, and stretched out his hand.

But Wroth struck it back, moved by an inexplicable impulse.

"Leave her alone!" he ordered, "I care not what she is. She looks like a spectre, something dead——" The clouds, gathering back in the sudden spring gloom, threw darkness and chill upon the room and added to the superstitious fear that seemed to have laid hold of him. "God knows," cried he, turning fiercely away, "my life's spread dark enough and dreary enough without my attaching such a shadow as this to it!"

There was no affectation in the shudder that seized him. He moved quickly to the other side of the window. The fates had decided.

"Ah," he cried, with a perfunctory gallantry, running his eye over the gay cloak, the fashionable figure, "from night to morning. Madam, you have a charming taste in colour." The insolent eye measured her up and down. "A witching little foot, by George! And, madam, your dressmaker fits you perfectly. May I——? Will you——? Just the merest lifting of all this lace."

The lady broke into a laugh; it had in that tense atmosphere something fresh and spontaneous that fell very pleasantly. She flung back her veil and tilted her chin upwards with a little jerk, impudent and fascinating.

"If your lordship is pleased to look——"

"I declare," he exclaimed, "dimples!"

But there was no lighting up of his glance. A sharp ejaculation escaped Martindale; he stepped back with an angry frown. The eyes of the other two kindled at sight of the pretty red and white face.

"Well, my lord?" she inquired, smiling still more broadly. She had wide, curving lips.

"My dear," said he wearily, "I never could resist dimples."

She swept him an immense curtsey.

"Ah, zounds!" cried the silent gentleman, for once enthusiastic. "Wroth, you lucky dog!"

"Bah," spluttered Martindale, "it is a put-up job. I tell you, Holroyd, Wroth has been playing with us! He had her up his sleeve—all the while—and as for her——"

But the laughing gentleman who had advanced from the door was now laughing no longer.

"Why, devil take me, if it is not Beljoy—Peggie Beljoy of Drury Lane!"

"Peggie Beljoy, yes," ejaculated Martindale, still

in a passion. "The cheat! Beljoy, indeed, Little Hellicat!" He caught his friend and shook him fiercely by the elbow. "I have a letter from her in my pocket, this minute, telling me she's come down here, just for me. It's all a damned trick of Wroth's—a brazen plant. Look at her! Oh, confound women!"

Holroyd gazed uncertainly from Wroth to the actress. Was it all indeed a hoax—fortune, placard, and all the mad business? If there is one thing your man about town hates, it is being taken in.

"Pray, Miss Beljoy," said Martindale bitingly, "what comedy part do you play here to-day?"

"The emergency part of bride to my Lord Wroth," said she, fluttering gaily at him, charmed by the spectacle of his jealous fury. Then she was shaken by a little sudden cough, and pressed a white hand to her side.

"Indeed, I trust so, and in sober earnest," said Wroth, with his air of forced interest. "If you will permit, Miss Beljoy, since that is your name, there is no time to lose, my attorney will wait upon you presently." And over his shoulder, to the gentleman of the notebook, he gave the haughty order: "Take down Miss—ah—Miss Beljoy's address, Scaife. And so your pencil will have some meaning at last."

Miss Beljoy rolled her brilliant green eyes from her old admirer to her future bridegroom and his satellite, and there was just the faintest tightening of her pretty smile. But she gave her address with apparently unruffled good humour.

"I lodge at Mr. Wood's bookshop—in Chapel Place."

She bent close over Mr. Scaife's shoulder, as he

scribbled upon a blank page (hastily turned over) forming the words with her lips and punctuating them with nods and dimples. Then she turned her determined seductiveness upon Wroth:

"I shall be charmed to meet the gentleman, my lord. Shall we say in an hour's time?"

"A little before, if it will not inconvenience you, madam"—Wroth drew back a step from her fluttering—"since the instrument which seals your favour to me must be ready before to-day's noon."

She flung back her head and showed her teeth in a loud laugh; dropping suddenly her artificial graces.

"There can never be too much law about such a business for me, you know," she cried with frank cynicism. She caught Martindale's eye and winked; his sullen face lit up. Wroth watched them from under his drooping eyelids savagely enough.

"Then come, gentlemen!" he cried. "Till half-past eleven, madam—when we meet in St. Thomas's Church. But Mr. Minchin will arrange all details with you."

He bowed ironically. She shifted her cane to her left hand, and swept him the right with a flourish. Perforce he had to bend over it, but his lips did not touch it.

Taking Martindale's arm he went from the room, with a final resentful glance at the black figure that still stood in its baffling immobility. Laughing Holroyd tried to laugh again, but it was a failure. There was a general sense of flatness; this joke had a ring of deadly earnest after all. Scaife stood a moment longer over his tablets:

"Blue Mantle and Dimples romped in, easy winner—Dark Horse nowhere," he wrote.

Martindale, running back, seized him impatiently.

"Scaife, you rascal, come along. George will not trust you with his bride," he cried mockingly. Hustling the other across the threshold, he flung an ironical farewell kiss towards Peggy.

CHAPTER X

As the door closed Miss Beljoy's anger exploded:

"'Pon my soul!" she exclaimed aloud, "'pon my soul, here's a tidy set of fellows!" She flung her stick upon the table. "Here, you black dummy, won't you let us have a look at you? You're an old love, I'll swear—or else a bailiff in disguise."

The figure took a step forward. A cold, clear voice spoke:

"Peggy!" And the veil was thrown back.

"You—you . . . here!" The girl's eyes started from their sockets. A greenish pallor spread over her face, emphasised by a deepening red spot on each cheek.

"You?" cried Peggy Beljoy again. Then the blood welled back into her face; her wide nostrils quivered: "Ah, you've dogged me again! But I'm not a poor dying wretch this time, to be preached at, and watched, and kept like a child! I'm free of you now, Madame Belgiojoso. I need not take your bounty now, thank God! I've got an income of my own, and I've made a name for myself too. Peg me no Peggies, if you please. I'm Miss Beljoy of Drury Lane, and I'm going to be Lady Wroth of Hurley Abbey. What, you've come spying on me again? You must have precious little to do!"

"Be quiet, Peggy," said Juliana sternly. "Listen

to me. I am not spying on you. I had no idea that you intended coming here, when I came here myself. I was not even sure it was you, until you spoke. I never thought that I should have to interfere with your life again. I hoped I never should see you again. This is the work of fate. Hush, listen to me! I have but one thing to say: you must give this up."

Peggy almost screamed.

"Give this up? And why, may I ask? I ain't poaching on your ground now—am I? Oh, I'm to give it up, am I? I'm not to be made an honest woman of, ain't I? Not to become as grand a lady as you are, I suppose? What is it to you, anyhow?" The girl panted. Again the dry cough shook her. "What are you here for? What business is it of yours?"

"My business in this matter you would not understand. My business with you is this: you gave me a promise once. Peggy, I claim it now."

Once more the sickly pallor crept about the actress's mouth.

"I wish to God," she cried passionately, "I'd never laid eyes on that wicked old husband of yours! I wish my mother had strangled you, when she had the nursing of you—you are the curse of my life!" She broke into a whimper, sudden as all her changes of mood. "I'm sure you mean well with me, my lady. It is not so brazen as it seems. I like the looks of the young man, I do indeed—it may be the saving of me."

"Of you!" cried Juliana. The great purple eyes flashed as only once before Peggy had seen them flash. "Of you!—I'm not thinking of you. You are the least of my thoughts. I've saved you once, when

your own evil deed had brought on you a righteous judgment. You swore to me, then, that whatever I asked of you, you would do. It was a solemn oath, you called God to witness it. Now, I tell you, I claim it."

Peggy's eyes rolled; too well did she remember that rash, that awful vow: "May God strike me dead on the spot if I break my promise!" Peggy did not want to die, and she was superstitious.

"Well, what is it you want me to do?" she asked sullenly, after a long pause.

"To let me take your place to-day, first with the attorney, then at the church," said the quiet voice. Juliana flung the clinging veil from her head. "I will wear that hat and veil of yours, Peggy; and that blue pelisse will cover me from head to foot. We are of a height, no one will suspect the change. And that is what I wish."

Peggy fell into a chair, staring, unable to credit her ears.

"My lady!" she gasped at last, "what, in the name of mercy, do you mean to do?"

"To take your place; I have told you so," repeated the Countess Mordante, steadily. "I am going to be married to Lord Wroth to-day, instead of you."

The foster-sisters fixed each other a second or two in silence. Then the girl's face became convulsed with ugly laughter:

"And the poor old man scarcely cold in his grave yet," she jeered, "why, I mourned him as long myself!" Then anger broke higher than insolence. "It's the meanest thing I ever heard! Taking advantage of a poor girl—robbing her of her chances!"

"Silence!" said Juliana. There was not a quiver upon the composure of her countenance. She stood, her delicate brows scarcely contracted, thinking profoundly.

"The circumstances are so strange," she said, as if to herself. "No one will wonder if the woman whom Lord Wroth marries to-day for the sake of some mad wager, or some fatal freak, should hide her face during the ceremony. He will care least of all. Afterwards—afterwards"—her lips parted upon the quickened breath, a light leaped to her eye, a faint glow to her cheek. Then she remembered the listener: "Meanwhile, for the interview with the lawyer, I will go to your rooms."

Peggy turned, raging, yet afraid to rebel.

"And me? What's to become of me?"

"Stay," said Juliana suddenly, "whatever settlement is to be made on the future Lady Wroth, rest assured, Peggy, you shall not be at the loss of it."

"Thank you for nothing, my lady," said the actress between her teeth.

As Juliana drew her veil close about her again, the shadow of a sigh was on her lips. How deeply, even in these few months, the stamp of her reckless life had become impressed upon the girl. Perverse as she had been before, there had been a youthful irresponsibility about her that appealed and condoned. Now this bold and coarsened creature seemed to have lost all connection with the little foster-sister she had once loved.

Miss Beljoy took the lead through the lounging groups that hung about the hotel door. The white fall of lace was still thrown back on her hat; and despite the fury seething in her soul, the murmurs, the

outspoken comments, the laughter and curiosity which greeted her, were all grateful to her vanity. This atmosphere of notoriety and admiration, insolent or otherwise, of curiosity and excitement, were as the breath of her nostrils. The veiled figure following her, so dark in her mourning against the spring sunshine, evoked but little interest. Some of the idlers about the parades cast a fleer at the widow who was so keen on a second mate. But Juliana's thought wrapped her round as closely as her disguise. No outside judgment could touch her soul, even as no vulgar glance could reach her countenance.

In the queer little room over the bookshop, with its sloping floor and its striped paper, its hard, spindle-legged sofa, its narrow chimney-piece and dim round mirror, which was Peggy's parlour, Juliana and her foster-sister—the two so strangely linked together, so deeply apart—were once more alone. Fresh storms had been gathering in Peggy during the passage; and, no sooner was the door closed upon them than it broke out. She caught at Juliana's hand.

"Don't take him from me, don't!" she cried. "Leave me my chance . . . for the sake of the days when we were children together and my soul was as pure as yours! For the sake of the mother who cheated me of my rights that she might nourish you! I went to that place for a freak, it is true. I don't care if you know it. It is good for an actress to be talked about. It can't do her harm, anyhow. 'I'll have my fun out of this crack-brained rake of a lord,' said I to myself, when I read his placard, 'then I'll teach him his place.' I knew he'd choose me——" She paused, the tears stood on her cheek, but above them her eyes shot triumph.

Juliana withdrew her hand from the hot clasp. Had she shown him her face, there—before them all, he would have fallen at her feet. She knew that. But it could not have been—it could not have been. In that sordid room, in that scene of insolent triviality, of mockery, of cynicism, a mummer herself in an ignoble comedy, she could not have revealed herself.

"And he did choose me," went on Peggy, "and I, the moment I saw him coming upon us, his eyes so bright, his hair all flashing in the sun, I said: 'That's the man for my money.' What do you want with him? You're too good for the likes of him! What would you do with him—you, so virtuous? But we'd suit each other. I don't want them good, and shouldn't think he'd want them good. And I'd be My Lady, Lady Wroth! You're a ladyship already. . . . It's hard you should grudge me the chance of my life!"

The actress gave herself to each mood of passion as the reed to the eddying current. She was moved by her own pleading, convinced by her own rhetoric. She ended, sure of her cause.

"I keep you to your oath, Peggy," said Juliana, when silence fell.

She had stood unmoved—no marble more cold—by the other's emotion. For a moment the girl fixed her with an eye of almost animal hatred, then she drew a strangled breath and clutched her breast. Fear and anger bandied her between them. But at every temptation to defy her vow the hand of death seemed to grasp at her throat.

"Damn you!" she cried at last—"we are quits, then! I borrowed your old husband, you're stealing my young one!"

Juliana looked at her watch. "This attorney," she said, "he may be here at any moment now. Peggy, I will take your cloak and veil."

Peggy tore her hat from her head, and flung it with its floating laces on the table; then she shook herself out of her pelisse and left it as it fell on the floor. With the hard red spot on either cheek she watched her foster-sister unwind herself in her turn from veil and mantle; watched the firm, beautiful figure emerge like a flower from the sheath; watched with dismay and hatred.

Juliana's rich pallor flashed into loveliness as it met the bloom of the velvet; under the sweep of the hat brim, the soft shadows of the plumes, her beauty shone triumphant.

"Leave me, Peggy. You can remain in the bedroom."

She ordered and waited for the girl's sullen exit. Then she drew one of the stiff Chippendale chairs to the table and sat herself down to wait. Peggy's primroses lay close to her feet, where they had fallen during her furious disrobing. Juliana stooped and picked them up, holding them to her face under the veil. Her mind was set on strange deeds, and she had no pleasure in them. But the spring flowers seemed to touch her cheek with a fresh caress, to breathe, in their fragrance, a promise as of something delicate and sweet.

"Miss Beljoy," said the rosy, down-at-heel slut that waited on the lodgers at Mr. Wood's, "a gentleman for you, please, Miss." She slammed a card on the table and her flat soles were heard slopping down the narrow carpetless stairs.

The lawyer halted on the threshold an instant.

"Miss Beljoy, of Drury Lane?" he queried of the fine lady who was seated at the table in blue velvet and plumed hat. The feathers on the hat waved as the lady made a slow inclination.

Mr. Minchin closed the door and came across the sloping floor. The statuesque folds of sapphire velvet were disturbed, as a white hand indicated a chair. He sat and considered the figure opposite to him. A fall of very handsome lace practically concealed the countenance. The pelisse, however, was so disposed as to reveal glimpses of what Mr. Minchin (connoisseur in his way) described to himself as a remarkably elegant shape. Between the scolloped edge of the lace and the blue velvet there was a line of ivory throat, round and stately. The hand that had courteously indicated his seat had now rejoined its fellow; and both lay folded loosely over each other on the table. He gave a contemptuous inner chuckle at sight of a wedding ring.

Miss Beljoy, of Drury Lane, had rapidly become a noted person—if not for her talent at least for her attractions. And from the instant that he had heard of the identity of the future Lady Wroth, he had jumped to the opinion which Holroyd had candidly imparted to him a few minutes before in the street. "A put-up job, mark me, sir, mark me. Martindale and I saw Wroth tipping her the wink when it came to the point. By the lord, if I should ever be forced to marry at a day's notice, I hope my fate will wear as alluring a little muzzle!"

True, the lawyer had just received from his client explanations and instructions somewhat incompatible with this view. But Lord Wroth's eccentricity was

becoming systematic. And Mr. Minchin was still too angry with him, not to be inclined to place the worst construction upon his motives.

The lawyer had passed a sleepless night. While his pride bade him carry out his threat and abandon the young man to his fate, every instinct in his legal being, a kind of professional passion, and a natural tenacity of purpose, rebelled against being beaten in a case the gaining of which must prove so profitable alike to client and firm. At first, indeed, he would not admit to himself that it was for any other purpose than a kind of mental relaxation during the long hours of vigil that he had begun to examine the various manners in which the license difficulty could be surmounted, and a legal marriage accomplished in spite of its apparent impossibility. Though a man of the utmost rectitude, no lawyer in the land had made a deeper study of the ways in which the spirit of laws could be evaded whilst their letter was accomplished. In this case, however, there was but one loophole; and to get through it would mean a tight squeeze, involving the loss of certain rags and shreds of integrity, nay, the possible loss to himself of that good cloak of reputation which he had worn so honourably all these years.

Yet the more Mr. Minchin dallied with this mental exercise, the more irresistible its fascination became. He could never have told the exact moment when his resolution to take the risk was formed. Yet when the dawn broke, he was not only resolved, but filled with an odd sort of eagerness for, almost enthusiasm in, his questionable scheme.

He could hardly wait for a seasonable hour to ride into Tunbridge Wells, to select a clergyman suitable to his plans. His mad client's last words had been:

"It's your business, Minchin, to make it legal—that's where you come in."

Mr. Minchin was determined to do his business. Lord Wroth's marriage was apparently going to be as disreputable as the rest of his proceedings. It might, probably would, lead to trouble hereafter, but his lawyer would see that it was binding. As to its consequences, in other legal directions, if unpleasant consequences there should be—why, it would be his lordship's business to bear with them. As he gazed upon the notorious person whom it had pleased Lord Wroth to select, in the most notorious manner conceivable, the thought arose that, no doubt, the madcap had had after all some method in his madness, and had chosen this singular bride in so singular a manner with some plan of present enjoyment and future freedom. And he rejoiced grimly in the knowledge of the solidity of the bond he was preparing for them.

He now took deliberate stock of the lady's finery, her farce of grand deportment, of beauty retiringly veiled, and the sharp smile sketched itself on his lips. Mr. Minchin had his vicarious experience of the world; he knew that attitude of dignified reserve in which, when your lady of pleasure chooses to assume it, she will outmatron any matron, Roman or British.

"Were I to beg her to lift her veil," he sneered to himself, "she'd be capable of raising a cry of 'Unhand me, villain!' in the best tragic manner. Well, I'm sure my young man deserves no better. Yet, if time were not so short. . . . Madam," he began aloud, in his driest tone, "I presume I am correct in understanding that you have been prepared for my errand—in short that you have agreed to marry

Lord Wroth in such exceptional circumstances this morning."

Again the slow inclination of the head.

"For reasons," he went on, "which, no doubt, his lordship will afterwards explain to you, Lord Wroth desires his marriage to take place not later than to-day. In this very peculiar situation there are matters of paramount importance to attend to in a very short time, and therefore my interview with you must be as brief as possible."

The plumes here remained perfectly steady. With a jerk of the shoulders the lawyer proceeded somewhat tartly:

"The name of Beljoy, madam, I take it, is assumed —an assumption most usual for stage purposes. Your real name is?"

"Juliana Mordante Belgiojoso."

It was a low deliberate voice that dropped the three words from beneath the veil. The lawyer's grey eyebrows were elevated.

"Would you kindly spell it? Thanks. Ah, I see now the connection: Belgiojoso, Beljoy. But the name is foreign." He was writing rapidly in his notebook. "Domicile?"

"Formerly of Italy; now of no fixed abode."

Mr. Minchin hesitated a moment. But it was scarce his mission at such a juncture to create difficulties. Time pressed. It was not the moment to investigate. He passed on rapidly.

"Spinster, of course," he said, his pencil poised, sure of the answer.

"Widow."

Mr. Minchin started. He glanced sharply at her: his face became corrugated into lines of frowning perplexity. Before the legal mind, vistas of horrid

possibilities spread themselves. A husband?—these ladies had ways of burying their impediments. And these impediments had a way of rising from their graves whenever it was profitable to do so. The case was common, common to monotony; but in connection with himself, with the fortunes of Wroth, bigamy, scandal, annulment—his hair bristled. His soul moaned for the security of honest Mary Campbell, and for the hundredth time he anathematised the insensate folly that had rejected her.

"Married, madam?" he queried sternly.

"Widowed," said the steady voice.

The words somehow carried conviction; there was not a tremor among the black and white feathers, not a twitch of the folded hands. For the first time he felt a sudden absurd temptation, instantly repressed, to snatch away the veil. What would the face be like of one who had such a voice and such hands? "'Pon my soul," he cried to himself impatiently, "that's a confoundedly dangerous woman—'Alluring little muzzle,' indeed!—How these puppies talk!"

If his impression counted for anything, incomplete as it was, the future Lady Wroth was none of your pretty fools, but a deep, designing woman! One too clever to place herself at variance with the law. Well, his responsibility ended with the marriage. He proceeded hurriedly:

"With regard to settlements, I think you will have no cause for complaint. Lord Wroth intends to allow you for life two thousand pounds a year—which will be paid quarterly in advance. This will be settled on you by deed. He wishes me to inform you that he attaches no condition to this handsome settlement save one, which no doubt will be as agreeable to yourself as

to him, . . . though it is somewhat unusual in a matrimonial contract. It is this: that you respect his liberty of action as completely as he will respect yours. You are to consider yourself absolutely free to pursue your profession, to choose your residence, so long as it is not within twenty miles of his own. In fact your existences are to separate absolutely after the ceremony. This condition he has instructed me to make unmistakably clear to you. I need not point out, madam, that sentiment could not enter into an alliance contracted in such exceptional circumstances."

The plumes bent very low.

The door creaked suddenly. The lawyer shot an uneasy look over his shoulder, and waited a moment. But their privacy remained undisturbed.

"The ceremony takes place," he resumed, "at St. Thomas's at a quarter before noon. May I request you to be there in good time?"

"I will be there," said Juliana.

The lawyer paused and hemmed. He began to tap the table with a dry finger. If it could be said that Mr. Minchin was ever embarrassed, it was on this occasion. He was determined to keep secret the real cause of Lord Wroth's hasty marriage from the person chiefly concerned until its conditions had been irrevocably accepted. It would have been turning the cat into the dairy! God knows what extortionate bargain the woman might exact, could she guess the fortune that was at stake. Nevertheless, to conceal his own anxiety for the immediate tying of the knot, to explain the subterfuge that would be necessary to make valid the license, was no easy task.

"You have some previous acquaintance with his lordship?" he began tentatively.

There was the faintest inclination. It seemed to mark the degree of acquaintanceship.

"You are aware at least that he is of an eccentric disposition?"

Her head remained steady.

"At any rate, madam," said the lawyer pettishly, "you have seen an example of his lordship's humour to-day. It is his pleasure to conduct the serious business of life upon the lines of schoolboy frolic. When, a fortnight ago, I received his instructions to obtain a marriage license"—never was the lawyer's voice more assured, never his eye more steady, than upon the utterance of this stupendous lie—"he apparently had fixed his choice upon another lady, for the name, he told me, was that of ah—Mary Campbell——"

He drew the license from his pocket and spread it on the table.

"It may be," he pursued, "that the lady in question has failed in her promise, and that Lord Wroth wishes to show—wishes to——" he began to grow confused, his unusual burst of romantic inspiration began to fail him. "At any rate"—his finger drummed—"he has set his heart on being wed to-day. Nothing can restrain him from his determination. And to ensure the legality of the ceremony, indeed to ensure the ceremony taking place at all, it will be necessary for you to consent to sign the register under the name of Mary Campbell. Are you attending to me, madam?" he cried sharply. "This is a delicate, a serious matter, one in which the consequences of the slightest misunderstanding would be deplorable."

Juliana, her fingers suddenly compressed in their clasp, had been struck to the heart by a new doubt. Was it possible—was this the explanation? Had

Wroth given his heart, and was this a lover's frenzied revenge—then, what was she doing here?

Mr. Minchin's next words flung a quick light upon her road again.

"You will have to decide, madam, as time is pressing. Your scruples may be praiseworthy, but misplaced at this juncture. May I remind you again that, Lord Wroth being resolved that the marriage shall take place to-day, it will be easy for him to find someone less scrupulous. You understand," he tapped the license once more, "that in spite of this appearance of a deception as to the name, this marriage will remain as binding as law and Church can make it? I will quote for your complete satisfaction the maxim of English law concerning the marriage contract which has a special bearing on the point—*Consensus, non concubitus, facit matrimonium*, which means that it is the consent of the parties which makes the marriage. I will request your attention for a minute or two more. It is most important that you should understand very clearly that this question of license is one which only affects the clergyman—it covers, in a measure, his responsibility. Concerning the parties themselves—if a man and a woman, neither having any impediment (such, for instance, as a living husband or wife), agree, before a recognised minister in holy orders, to espouse each other, that man and that woman are legally, irrevocably married. The civil contract, *per verba de presenti* (as we say), is complete; and the religious ceremony, whatever irregularity may subsequently be discovered and . . . censured, is fully binding. No matter therefore under what name—or names—you and Lord Wroth chose to espouse each other before the altar, so long as you and he are agreed so to take each other nothing can invalidate the legality of the union,

The only person who might incur some subsequent unpleasantness, hereafter, would be the clergyman. But, ah!"—Mr. Minchin waived the immaterial detail, with a wave of two grey fingers. "For yourself, madam, you do but employ a subterfuge which the circumstances render necessary. But do not forget to answer to the name of Mary."

"I will do it," said Juliana suddenly. She rose from her seat. It was a movement of determined acceptance.

"Time presses," repeated the lawyer, greedily pursuing his success. "The ceremony is fixed for a quarter to twelve—it is time we should be on the way." His hand shook a little with suppressed excitement. "If you will make use of my chaise, which is at the door, and accept of my escort, I shall be honoured. The townsfolk are somewhat excited, you might be inconvenienced."

Juliana moved acquiescingly towards the door; and Mr. Minchin found himself, to his own subsequent astonishment, assisting her to his carriage with as much deference as ever he showed the most respectable dowager among his clients. Triumph was mounting ever higher in him. Not only had he rounded the awkward corner with perfect success; but by this brilliant capture he was preventing the bride from holding communication with any one but himself, and so providing against her receiving any inopportune information.

As he took his seat by her side, however, he was conscious of a most unusual sensation: that of being baffled. All his preconceived ideas of the class to which he had no doubt his companion belonged gave way before the impression, incomplete as it was, of her personality. He was haunted by those still, clasped

hands, ivory, beautiful; by the echo of her voice. The thought rose again that here was a remarkable woman, a dangerous, deep, dark character, or he was greatly mistaken. Well, with the saving of Wroth's fortune his task was ended!

CHAPTER XI

THERE was no such eager crowd in the streets as Mr. Minchin had anticipated. The honest townsfolk that had assembled to applaud the latest prank of the mad lord of Hurley Burley were not to be taken in by any statement of the burlesque placard. No one had ever heard of anybody being married in that way. It was only his lordship's joke on the town and on the silly women who had made such a spectacle of themselves. The community, moreover, was beginning to have somewhat of a surfeit of Lord Wroth's pleasantries. The idlers, therefore, hung about the bar, drinking and applauding themselves for seeing through the hoax. Busy people went to their business and gave the discreditable matter little further thought. The streets were quiet.

The distant church of St. Thomas was empty, save for Lord Wroth and his three friends, when Juliana and Mr. Minchin arrived. In the porch Mr. Minchin halted a second in his jerking hurried gait.

"Have you anybody to give you away?" he asked of Juliana.—"Shall I undertake the office?"

To anyone less absorbed in her own thought, the disinterested attorney must have seemed vastly interested in facilitating that ceremony which, according to his own assertion, was a mere freak. But the bride

accepted without appearing to notice anything singular in his eagerness.

"If you will be so kind," she murmured.

Subsequently, Mr. Minchin recalled his share in the events of the morning as a man recalls the irresponsible deeds of a dream. He gave her his arm and thus they came up the nave. Had ever legal responsibility taken a stranger part in a questionable enterprise?

It was a little, bare, yellow church; but the sunshine was striking in through the white-paned windows, and brought a faint warmth about Juliana's heart. The clergyman was a heavy-faced, inert-looking man, with a bewildered, doubtful expression of countenance. He was constantly jogged by a bright, pert clerk upon the details of the ceremony over which he seemed inclined to pause as if to ponder upon its advisability.

Mr. Scaife and Sir Thomas Holroyd conversed carelessly, with scarce a lowering of the voice. Martindale held himself sulkily apart. Wroth himself—his natural pallor startlingly accentuated—booted and mud-stained, stood at the altar-step with an air of fierce, resentful recklessness that would have better suited a highwayman at Tyburn, with all his energies bent upon dying game.

The bride silently took her place and awaited her moment with that sphinx-like air of repose to which the heavy folds of her impenetrable white lace added mystery. Mr. Minchin fell back, his nervous hand jingling the seals at his fob.

"I, George Conrad, take thee, Mary, to my wedded wife, to have and to hold . . . for richer for poorer . . . till death us do part."

That voice, which Juliana had heard veiled to the most exquisite tenderness, resounded harsh, savage; the vow came almost like a curse.

"I, Mary, take thee, George Conrad——"

She, dreading lest her first-spoken word to him would be her betrayal, breathed the bidden promise in a mere whisper. But there was a fantastic sort of sweetness for her even about that moment! She was glad that here, at least, there was none of the planned subterfuge or deceit—the name was her own, as much as Juliana, thank God!—and she meant every syllable of the beautiful and sacred bargain.

Mr. Minchin, under the stress of his multifarious anxieties, had omitted to think of a detail usually attended to by the bridegroom himself. There was a moment's awkward pause. Where was the ring? Martindale, the best man, surveyed the difficulty with sneering satisfaction.

"The ring, my lord," whispered the man of business. "Any ring will serve. Your lordship's own signet."

He laid agitated fingers on Wroth's hand to loosen the trinket. Impatiently the bridegroom thrust him back, drew the ring himself, and with disdainful touch completed the ceremony.

The circlet hung as loosely on Juliana's finger as the union it symbolised in the bridegroom's purpose. The deed was accomplished; the man and the woman were husband and wife.

Juliana found herself being led to the vestry in correct fashion; but, once across the threshold, Wroth dropped his arm from her touch, and strode to the table as if she had not existed. It hardly needed a glance at his face to make her aware of the mood which had

hold of him. A fury, the more savage that it was dumb, seemed to fill the very air that surrounded him. It withered the constrained congratulation on the clergyman's lips; it deepened the anxiety wrinkling Mr. Minchin's brow and hovering in his restless glance. It damped the hilarity of the two lively friends. Before it, Martindale's sullenness faded into childish insignificance. To Juliana it brought strangely mingled terror and joy. She was glad that after his horrible light-mindedness of the morning he should at least feel his own degradation, recoil from this travesty of a most sacred contract, from this voluntary choice of baseness in lieu of the best that life can give. On the other hand, here was indeed a man of passion so unruly that he might well sacrifice everything for vengeance; and if, as the lawyer had suggested, vengeance were the true motive of this day's doing, where did her own hopes stand? Where was the foundation stone of that daring palace of happiness that in her mind she had built for them both?

Wroth signed the register, dashed the pen from him, flung a look about the circle, to end upon her—a look before which her heart stood still. Then, as if the air of the little place suffocated him, he pulled open the side door and plunged into the graveyard, desolately green in the shadow of the church. The wind rushed in upon them, charged with chill. Juliana thought it carried the breath of death.

The voice of Mr. Minchin in her ear recalled her vanishing courage:

"Will you kindly sign——? Yes, under Lord Wroth's name, here, if you please."

He pointed to the place with his left hand, and

pressed the quill on her with the other. As she stooped mechanically, he bent over her.

"Mary Campbell." The words were breathed into her ear, compellingly, and there was a tremor in the faint sound.

She was not of those who draw back, though her whole being shrank from the falsehood. She wrote steadily; then she hesitated a second, and moved by an uncontrollable impulse, set her own name underneath—Mary Juliana Belgiojoso.

Mr. Minchin made a movement, quickly restrained, drew a sharp breath, and shot an angry glance at her, baffled again by the veil. Nevertheless, the deed was done, and even the exposure of the truth could not now invalidate its legality. It was, however, none of his purpose to see the suspicions of the parson further aroused; and now, beholding this worthy fumbling for his glasses and settling them on his nose to survey the newly signed page, he braced himself.

"Sir!" said the clergyman, straightening himself with a jerk; then, flustered and irate: "This is a strange business. I have never yet been called upon," he went on, warming in his protest, "to join together a couple who have behaved in this manner."

His eyes rolled from the open door to the rigid figure of the deserted bride.

"And now, this lady's double signature, these two names. Only, Mr. Minchin, for your well-known character—even with a special license"—he tapped the document on the table—"I would have hesitated——"

"My dear sir," interrupted Mr. Minchin, with some eagerness, "did I not tell you that the lady is an

actress? It is perfectly correct that she should sign her real name as well as the accepted name by which she is known to the world. Belgiojoso—Beljoy. You will remember the lady's stage name is Beljoy." He hurried away from the delicate subject. "And you are further acquainted, my dear sir, with Lord Wroth's peculiarities." He lowered his voice. "You are no stranger here. We touched upon the matter this very morning—my responsibility as his legal adviser——"

"My responsibility, sir!" broke in, in his turn, the dissatisfied divine. "This is a most untoward affair, my responsibility——"

"Is completely covered, I assure you. The license is in order, and so are the signatures. Fortunately, my dear sir," proceeded Mr. Minchin suavely, "neither of us has to answer for the consequences of an eccentric young man's method of conducting his matrimonial venture. Madam," he turned to the bride, "will your ladyship once more accept of my escort? Lord Wroth, no doubt, awaits us outside."

The Reverend Charles Jones beckoned up his sharp clerk from the church with a portentous wag of his forefinger; and, as Mr. Minchin led Juliana hurriedly from the vestry into the graveyard, both could be seen poring together over register and license.

Mr. Minchin drew out a yellow silk handkerchief and mopped his brow.

Wroth was standing, with his back to the church, staring at a grey tombstone. Sir Thomas and Martindale had disappeared. Mr. Scaife alone stood beside him, and broke off, in the midst of some laughing phrase, to glance over his shoulder at the

approaching pair. He took off his hat with an immense flourish.

"A thousand congratulations to your ladyship."

The lawyer, tightening his arm over Juliana's hand, pressed her forward.

"My lord," he said, in a low peremptory voice, "you must now take Lady Wroth with you in the chaise." And, as the bridegroom stepped back with a livid frown, he added: "For heaven's sake, my lord, don't spoil all now. The parson is already much annoyed—indeed, alarmed. And I warned your lordship that a parting at the church door would be contributing an unnecessary element of suspicion."

Scaife caught the words, and a sudden sardonic smile spread over his countenance.

"Nay," said he, "Wroth has promised us a wedding breakfast, Mr. Minchin. Martindale and Tom Holroyd have gone ahead of us to set the matter going. Now this rascal Wroth is all for ratting away to London. We've told him a bargain's a bargain. My lady, I'll not be done out of drinking your health."

The leer with which he accompanied these words was lost upon the supposititious Beljoy, impassive-looking as ever, under her veil.

"Damn you!" said Wroth in a deadly level voice to the attorney. "And damn you!" he went on in the same tone, turning upon Scaife. Then he took a step forward, and made a faint inclination towards Juliana. "The parting," he said, "the parting, then, my lady, will not be at the church door. I crave your company at breakfast at the Crown Hotel."

He was turning on his heel when Mr. Minchin put

out his hand and arrested him. As Wroth shook off the touch, his concentrated exasperation broke forth in biting undertone:

"Old Satan, you've led me far enough. I'll go your way no more! Gad, man, you've tied the rope round my neck!" He thrust two fingers inside his stock as if to loosen some constricting knot. "I'll not be shut up in your chaise there with that woman for all the money in the Bank of England. I'm strangling as it is!"

He flung himself away from the lawyer's vain protest, set off running over the graves as one hunted, and was gone. Mr. Minchin wiped his forehead, and once more resigned himself to play the squire.

Juliana took seat in the chaise, as silently as her companion. It was only when the old vehicle had moved some distance, with many a creak and rattle, that she spoke:

"I desire to be set down at the lodgings where you found me."

"You will have to appear at the breakfast, I can tell you that," asserted Mr. Minchin, with considerable irritation. "Lord, ma'am, here have I been working—doing very questionable things, I can assure you, ma'am—to ensure the validity of this ceremony, and 'pon my soul, there are you and my lord doing your best to upset the apple-cart!"

"Oh, I will be there!" said Juliana. The feast, it seemed, was to be at her own hotel. Well, she would be there. What was done could not be undone; she must carry her part through, although a boding of unhappy end weighed heavily upon her.

"Ma'am," said the attorney, whose patience had given way with equal suddenness and completeness,

"you may please yourself. As for me, I'll have a bit of dinner in quiet. I've done my work. I wash my hands of the rest, ma'am, I wash my hands of the rest!"

Mr. Scaife, left alone in the churchyard, looked after the retreating chaise with humorous astonishment. He wagged his head and gave an inward chuckle of exceeding gusto.

"Gad, of all the amazing marriages! Bridegroom mad. Bride tied up like a mummy—as silent as one, anyhow. What card has the Beljoy minx got up her sleeve, with her airs of mystery?"

Had Mr. Scaife watched the new Lady Wroth enter the door of Mr. Wood's lodging, veiled, just as she had left it, and as slow pacing; had he, lingering on the pavement, been further a witness of the reappearance, ten minutes later, of the fair Peggy Beljoy, coquettishly attired in dove-coloured silks, shot with changing tones, her bright face exposed to the gaze of all mankind, beneath a little turban of blue that threw the colour of her hair in high relief; had he seen her step forth, challenging the very pavement with the beat of her conquering foot, and set her way for the Crown Hotel, Mr. Scaife would certainly have found stuff for wider astonishment.

When Juliana re-entered the actress's apartments, she found her in her bedroom, deeply engaged in toilet preparations. The girl turned upon her a countenance in which satisfaction and resentment were oddly blended.

"Well," she cried mockingly, "is your swindle successful? And what did he say when he saw it wasn't me?"

Juliana laid the borrowed hat upon the bed and

divested herself of the gay pelisse. Then she faced her foster-sister.

"He knows nothing yet," she said calmly.

"What?" cried Peggy, with an eldritch laugh. "Never raised your veil? Never a kiss for you, you his bride—not even an attempt to raise her veil! You have secured an ardent bridegroom, my lady!"

"Have I not just said, Peggy," said Juliana, "that Lord Wroth believes he has married you?"

Across Peggy's countenance anger swept like a wave, to be succeeded by an insolent gaiety.

"'Pon my soul," she cried, "if he had married me, foster-sister, I'd have found the way to make him want to see my face before we had been a minute together in the chaise—aye, in spite of all his precious bargains. Oh," shaking Mr. Minchin's card, "I heard that old devil explaining the conditions—I'd have found the way!"

"I did not drive here with Lord Wroth."

Again Peggy shrieked with mirth. Juliana proceeded, the shadow of a flush upon her face, still quietly:

"Where is my veil and my cloak? I must get back to my hotel."

Peggy fastened a brooch with elaborate care under her round, pert chin; and, without removing her eyes from a satisfied contemplation of herself in the little mirror, remarked casually:

"Couldn't we go together?"

Juliana frowned.

"Go together?"

"I'm bidden to your wedding feast, my Lady Wroth."

"Peggy," cried the other, "you did not betray me!"

Here Peggy wheeled round and measured Juliana with furious eyes.

"You know I dared not betray you!" she cried. "Didn't you hold me by the very fear of death till you'd played your trick? But I'm free of you now, thank heaven, thank heaven!" She stamped her sandalled foot. "I've done with my oath. I'm free to go my own way now without you." She broke into laughter in the midst of her anger. Her eyes began to dance. "I'm going to have some pleasure out of this after all. I'm going to your wedding breakfast, my lady. Ho, you don't know all the news! There's been a mad friend of your mad bridegroom going round with the bellman and calling all the disconsolates, the would-be Lady Wroths, to dry their tears and come to the feast. So I dried my tears, and I'm going. And now, since his lordship does not know yet whom he's married, there may be even more of a game than I thought. Shall we burst upon him arm-in-arm, my dear, and tell him to pick out his wife?"

"Peggy!"

All the passion of her southern blood, all the pride of her womanhood, was in Juliana's cry. It was a command and a forbidding. But the actress took a dancing step and snapped her fingers.

"Your jurisdiction is over."

"Go, then!" said Juliana.

And humming the song that had last taken town by storm, it was then Miss Beljoy sallied out into the street—a gay little craft, with all sail spread, deck cleared for action, eager for the fray.

Juliana remained standing, absorbed in thought, long after the patter of Miss Beljoy's sandals and the rustle of her silks had faded from the stairs; then, with

a long sigh, at last she roused herself and took up the black garment once more.

"What omens!" she thought, as she drew the folds about her, "beginning with the passage through the graves, upon my wedding morning! What will come of all this for me—for him?"

CHAPTER XII

SIR THOMAS HOLROYD returned in high feather from his self-imposed task of town-crier to superintend the preparation of the wedding breakfast. The joke had been to him, thus far, undiluted in its humour; and it would not be his fault if it did not end on the highest note of hilarity. The bridegroom's savage temper, Martindale's dudgeon, were but spice added to the savour of the dish; and the fruitlessness of his own recent prank seemed nearly as comic as success.

"Gad, Scaife," he cried, flinging himself into a chair and running his eye down the laden table with its ten seats, "it's the richest thing! The ladies won't come, ecod! The fat widow waddled at me with a besom out of a hardware shop! 'Pon honour—a hardware shop!—She's had enough of our games, she swears. Gad! she'd have beaten me for Wroth, only she's too fat, she couldn't run! As for the country wench, I met her being carted home by a round farmer like a calf to the butcher. She was whimpering, and the fellow had her by the ear. 'Breakfast?' he says, as I stopped his cart to deliver my polite invitation, 'I'll break your fast!' He clubbed his whip—I had to take to my heels again. Ecod! what a set of aspirants, what a testimony to Wroth's attraction!"

"Then we may take it that two will fail at least!" said Scaife the methodical, with a glance at the chairs.

"Two? You may take it they'll all fail. As for the black dummy—bailiff, or ghost of old crime, or whatever it was—there was no sign of her about. The old maid might have come, I'll swear—she was mincing up and down the Pantiles, but she's too damned genteel, and 'Fie, sir,' she says, shaking her curls at me, as I went up to her with my best bow, 'I'll not believe you, sir,' she says. 'Lord Wroth is a perfect gentleman, and it would never be his purpose to taunt ill-fortune.' Yet her eyes were eager, poor old tabby!"

"By George! What a Bo-peep," said Scaife, with his saturnine chuckle.

"Why don't you follow her up and do the peeping?" cried Sir Thomas, and exploded at his own wit.

"Why, then, who is left? Cyprian young lady?"

"Cyprian! Cyprian's overcome. She's toasted the bridal pair already. I saw her in the arms of the constable."

"Tut, tut—and he the guardian of morality at the Wells!"

"In short, our breakfast will be the primest thing in dismals," Sir Thomas broke forth again. "A row of empty chairs. And, gad! look at Martindale's face there! Cheer up, man, you should bless the stars instead of cursing them."

Martindale rolled his blue eyes arrogantly upon the voluble speaker.

"Speak plain, Tom."

"Why, dash my buttons, you've only had up to this an easy conquest with a little comedy actress, but now you'll have a devil of a fine game with my Lady Wroth! Pah! Is there no spirit in you, man?"

A gleam came into the blue eyes.

"Tom," said Martindale, after a musing spell, "Tom, now and again (by accident) you show a smattering of sense."

He tilted back his head and laughed. Sir Thomas rose and slapped him on the back.

"So long as Wroth gives you the chance of a little sport, eh? What do you bet he cuts the whole concern and never turns up at all? He had a devil of a wild look, steeple-chasing over the graves out there."

"Then I vote we toss for first start in the consolation stakes," put in the solemn voice of Mr. Scaife.

"Scaife," retorted Martindale, in a sudden blaze, "I've the prior claim! I'll have no tossing and no interference."

The two young men faced each other threateningly, while Holroyd shrieked with laughter. Here it was that Wroth himself dashed into the room.

"What a confounded ugly noise, Tom," he cried irritably. "Hang it, what a monstrous table! And pah! what a smell of meat! Get me a glass of champagne, Martindale, there's a good lad. Well, what the devil—where are the other fools? When is this confounded breakfast going to begin? I'll keep my word, of course, but let's have it over, for God's sake! Where's my bride? Aha, hang it! where's my Lady Wroth?"

There was a rustle of silk in the passage. The astounded waiter of the Crown knocked at the half-open door.

"Don't announce me," said a high-pitched voice.

"Talk of an angel," said Holroyd, with his laugh.

"Talk of the devil," muttered Martindale.

"May I enter?" chanted Peggy from the threshold,

a vision of dove colour and iridescent sheen, of red cheeks and impudent lips, of copper curls and challenging eyes.

"Come in . . . Lady Wroth!" said the bridegroom, in a low tone.

He bowed profoundly, looked at her slowly from head to foot, and then extended his hand. As she laid hers in it she was struck by its icy touch and the tremor that ran through it. And she cried in her vain heart:

"He thinks me his wife, he has already succumbed. I should have had triumph, triumph!"

Then into the eager, foolish brain shot the thought, greatly daring: "Play the game while it lasts, Peggy, my girl!"

"Is your lordship quite sure that I am now Lady Wroth?" she asked, mellifluously.

"As sure as I am of damnation," said Wroth between his teeth, dropping his hand from hers as she sank, with the trained actress' deliberation, into the chair he indicated.

"It all seems so strange, you know," said she innocently, with the thrill in her voice which she deemed so effective.

"Believe it, my fair bride, oh, believe it!" retorted he. "Faith is a fine virtue, and, by the Lord, it is borne in on me that your ladyship will want it on the subject of marriage with my unworthy self. But," he bared his teeth in an unmirthful laugh, "Mr. Minchin is warrant for the actuality of our union. And that should be monstrous consoling—were you tempted to doubt it, my lady. Martindale, take the other side of . . . Lady Wroth. What the devil, are we never to have this breakfast? Where is the wine, where are the servants? Tom, you always were an incapable ass with

your giggling—and, confusion, man! what do you mean by that row of empty chairs?"

"The fact is, George, your wedding feast is not popular, at the Wells," cried Tom, hanging on to the bell-rope. "No, it's not popular, that's flat! None of the other pretty ones of this morning will come to it."

"I crave ten thousand pardons, my dear," said Wroth, turning upon Peggy; "you see, it is not my fault, if I have failed, after all, to secure suitable guests to honour you."

"So long as you have each other," drawled Scaife across the table.

"So long as we have each other!" repeated Wroth, with ironic emphasis.

Peggy could take amusement out of a situation in which she was playing not the part of dupe but that of deceiver. Her full lips parted upon a sudden spontaneous laugh, curiously in contrast with her previous artificiality. Peggy Vaughan had the voice and laugh of a child, when she forgot to be Miss Beljoy, of Drury Lane.

Martindale flushed to the roots of his hair.

"The dog is insulting you," he whispered in her ear, "say but the word, and I'll call him out, Peg."

The girl's astute green eyes moved critically from her lover to her supposed husband, and back again. The aspirations of Miss Beljoy were no longer those of Peggy Vaughan. Martindale was a nice boy; quite amusing when nobody better was to be had; sufficiently in the fashion also to form a very respectable stop-gap. But this other, with his livid handsome face, with the glittering aversion in his eyes, with his ruddy hair, clustering round his head after a fashion that appealed

even to her ignorant taste; this man, with scorn and anger concentrated in every movement, with his eccentricity, his evil repute, his insolent treatment of women, was a man—a man, she thought, worth striving for, worth winning. The laugh died on her lips.

"Will your lordship give me a little wine," she murmured, and reached her left hand lazily for her glass. He glanced at the fingers that clasped the stem.

"I congratulate you upon your good sense," he said, as he tilted the foam into the long goblet.

"My good sense?"

"Your quick wit, if you prefer that."

"My lord——?"

"Nay, then," he flung himself impatiently backward. "I congratulate myself upon Mr. Minchin's exactitude in carrying out my instructions."

The colour flickered in the hectic bloom of her face.

"My good sense don't seem to be much use to me here," she retorted sharply. "As to my quick wits—give my quick wits another chance."

He tapped her left hand meaningly. She flushed again at his touch and looked down. Then she understood.

"Your lordship alludes to my wedding ring?" she said coolly enough, yet she trembled a little at the thought of the coming disclosure.

"It hung, in truth, very loose," said he. He had tossed down his glassful, and there was more animation in his manner, less lassitude, less disgust.

"Indeed, my lord," she said boldly, "loose enough, but when your lordship pleases to tighten it, it shall on again."

He gave her a dark look.

"Aye," he said, "wait for that, my lady, wait for that! Or, is it possible," pursued he then, brutally, "that the punctilious Minchin has failed in explicitness? Have you not understood that we are to set a matrimonial fashion? Nay, I am sure the idea should appeal to anyone with a grain of originality; instead of the commonplace, everday jog home together, it is to be, you know, each our way, gloriously free. And the further from each other, why, the better! Though twenty miles is your limit, by our contract, madam, I feel sure your soaring spirit will carry you to much vaster distances—and I rejoice in the thought."

Peggy, her chin on her hand, stared at him and clenched her teeth upon the rage that surged within her. Had she been in reality his wife, how she would have paid him out for this! Yet he still believed he had married her, and therefore was the outrage no less aimed at her. But she knew herself, knew that Peggy in a rage forgot to be Miss Beljoy, that by giving way she would lose both looks and manners, and the words of gall that rose to her lips were thrust down by an effort that almost turned her sick. She sat silent.

The servants were now moving about them. Holroyd and Scaife—the one in his uproarious fashion, the other in his dry way, were rising to what they conceived to be the spirit of the situation by freakish pantomime to empty chairs and exchange of pleasantries to each other. Martindale, with a bottle before him, was working himself to irresistible ardour, waiting for his moment.

Suddenly, Wroth's laugh rang out again. His black temper was merging into one of those moods of recklessness, usually hailed by his friends as prelude to his maddest and most diverting follies. He caught Peggy's hand:

"I vow, without the ring, it is quite squeezable," he cried.

"But your lordship's fingers are still very cold."

"A pity, my dear, that now, alas! it is never your fair hand will warm them!"

"Does your lordship indeed find no warmth in it?"

He withdrew his touch with a jerk.

"If I did," he said, "it would be hell. Zounds, are you not my wife?"

"A toast, a toast!" cried Holroyd. "The best man rises to propose the bride: Ladies and gentlemen, or rather, gentlemen, Wroth would have us believe that we all witnessed the growth of this romance. If this be true, I can assert that rarely has marriage better substantiated the poet's saying: 'He never loved at all, who loved not at first sight!' The bride, I will make bold to say, indeed—women are so clever! —must have forestalled the event. We may take it, gentlemen, that she must have loved the ardent bridegroom even before she ever saw him. But, how justified was she! She came, she saw, she conquered! . . . May we not prognosticate the complete happiness of a wooing that has been so short a-doing? Gentlemen, my brain reels, words fail before the glowing vision. Scaife, you dog, stop pulling at my coat-tail. If to us, wretched bachelors, nothing is left but envy, but despair—hey, Martindale?—let us drown these miserable feelings in the convivial cup, let us——"

He fell suddenly into his seat, dragged down by the united clutch of Martindale and Scaife. His eloquence was smothered in their shouts and laughter. But the bridegroom's voice was silent. As the words, "love at first sight," struck his ear, the cloud of his previous humour descended upon him in visible gloom. And, as now fresh cries that might have emanated

from twenty throats instead of three, called upon him to return thanks for the bride, he rose slowly and cast a glance around him that withered even that company into silence, that filled Peggy with a sudden vague terror of the unknown forces with which she had set herself so irresponsibly to play.

CHAPTER XIII

JULIANA, returning to the hotel, had passed unnoticed to her room and locked herself in. Solitude had been all her desire. She sat wrestling with herself, now almost tempted to fly from the immeasurable responsibility she had undertaken, now rehearsing in what words, at what moment she would reveal her identity to the new-made husband. What if she found that from the beginning she had been mistaken, that she had based her confidence upon the airy fabric of a dream, that the hour of their first meeting which she had thought the golden epoch of both their lives had been to him but the freak of the moment—worse still, but the delusion of a scarcely sober brain? What if he preferred this Beljoy—wanted this Beljoy?

Then reason would rise again upon the opposite side. Whatever the cause that had plunged him into this extraordinary union, his attitude at the church had been that of one who had a frenzy of distaste for the deed he was committing. Moreover, she knew Peggy, knew the existence he must lead, were he mated to that creature of profaned affections, of evil impulses, of most faithless heart—he, the man whom she had met on the heights, who had not even touched her hand.

Shouts of laughter—the note of a high hilarious

voice—echoed to her from the banquet room below. She shuddered and hid her face. Flight again seemed to beckon to her. The innocent fragrance and beauty of her gardens at Montemuscoli, the fair white silences of the marble-cased rooms of her Florentine abode, seemed to call. She could still leave all this day's folly behind, like an evil dream, fling herself back into solitude, withdraw from the contamination into which she was deliberately about to steep herself.

In spite of the lawyer's asseverations she believed that such a marriage could easily be annulled should she or Wroth demand it. . . . This marriage could be annulled! Then a sudden clenching of her hands brought the unfamiliar sensation of the loose, heavy ring. She sat staring at it. Symbol of a vow most solemnly undertaken . . . "for better for worse, till death do us part . . . !" His signet ring with the crest of Wroth — the wolf's head erased — and the motto, "Ruthless." Like a flash of lightning she saw her duty, saw what she had taken upon herself, what she must bear. She flung herself on her knees beside the bed and prayed a quick and passionate prayer. Then she unbolted the door and called for Panton:

"My purple velvet cloak—you remember, I told you to pack it? and my scarf! Bring them quickly."

"My lady!" stammered poor, fat, bewildered Panton, "with your mourning?"

"Bring it quickly," repeated Juliana.

She stood waiting, tapping her foot till the woman returned, flushed from her skirmish in the trunk, carrying the garment.

Juliana clasped the velvet about her. He would

remember, he must remember: thus had she been garbed upon that night of revelation. Motioning back her maid, she went forth alone into the passage and down the stairs.

Before she reached the last step a thought struck her; and she paused upon its hideous suggestion. Peggy had forestalled her at the feast. Her secret was doubtless already betrayed—and how! Into what depth of humiliation was she not bringing her proud soul! But it was the final weakness: she shook it from her and proceeded to meet fate.

Two waiters stood outside the banquet room, one of whom was holding the door slightly open. Both the eavesdroppers were grinning. Inside, all the noisy clamour that had penetrated even to Juliana upstairs, had now given place to the ring of one voice. Wroth was speaking. His accents resounded, harsh, arrogant in brief sentences that fell like the cuts of a whip, each flung out to sting, to lash.

The servants, abashed, made way and disappeared. Juliana pushed the door and halted on the threshold, unperceived. Wroth was standing with his back to her, one hand on the table; his guests sat as if spellbound, each face of them a study in amazement.

"And so," the bridegroom was saying, "I thank you all, my good friends, my dear friends. Miss Beljoy—I beg her pardon, my Lady Wroth—has graced her *rôle* to-day to the full as artistically as any she has undertaken on the boards of Thespis. I trust you noted, gentlemen, the exquisite reserve of a bride who did not permit so much as the tip of her chin to be visible in those sacred precincts where she whispered her vows—and yet it is quite a pretty chin, as you may all see for yourselves, now. And

my Lady Wroth has further shown you that she can toss a bumper and crack a joke, and roll an eye with the best of you, at the fitting hour and place, in due season . . . I declare, when I look at her, boys, I almost wish I had not married her, for, by my soul, there's something about the minx that might have please me . . . were she not my wife. But a wife? As soon expect a man to find charm in the neat twist of the halter that is about to hoist him aloft—A wife! . . . Marriage! Invention of some aged hags, jealous of youth and beauty, to make a sparkling wench as odious and tedious as themselves! Who would want to kiss a lip, gentlemen, when dull duty, not a delicate inspiration, bids? Pah! 'Tis yesterday's champagne! Who would want to clasp a waist chained like a convict's to your side for life? Matrimony—the coffin of love! The fairest would lie in it, for me, as a rotting corpse. Cover it up! Take it away! Forget it! The fairer she was, the more it sickens me to look at her now. Had she been dear, she would be ten times hateful. No woman could stand the test; no beauty is strong enough, no wit bright enough, no charm sweet enough, no beloved loved enough! You want me to reply to your toast, to drink to matrimony? Gentlemen, I'll drink to freedom, I'll drink to the gold-bags secured at so devilish a price, but which you and I will spend so jovially! We'll spend them all, you shall spend them, I'll spend them! Lift glasses, we'll drink and drink again oblivion to marriage and hey for freedom and money!"

Indescribable was the bitterness with which Wroth poured out his fantastic tirade; indescribable the passion of his resentment against the bonds which it seemed almost he felt physically shackling him. For

while he spoke, now and again he seemed to be plucking at invisible fetters; and at the climax it was as though he flung them from him in the face of her whom he addressed as his wife.

Peggy, who at the outset had flushed and winced, then shown bewilderment, confusion, anger and shame almost to tears, had suddenly, in the very middle of his speech, altered her demeanour. She had caught a glimpse, in the mirror opposite, of a milk-white, stricken face framed in the blackness of the doorway. Instantly the arrows apparently aimed at her, flew by, to reach a truer goal. The insult was for Juliana! The humiliation for Juliana! For Peggy, rich amusement and sweeter revenge!

As Wroth halted breathless, his hand on a brimming glass, he caught sight of the girl's wide, impertinent grin, and instinctively followed the direction of her fixed glance. Instantly the glass fell from his hand. He stared into the mirror as if at a supernatural apparition.

But a general movement of curiosity towards the door made him turn his head, and, for the space of a breath, Wroth and Juliana looked again upon each other. Then Peggy's laugh broke the spell. The next instant Juliana was gone, so swiftly and so softly that none could have arrested her flight. The door closed upon her.

"Zounds! who is the goddess?" cried Sir Thomas, excitedly.

Peggy's lips hesitated on the brink of a startling announcement; then she flung a look at the bridegroom's face, and in a second the whole plan of action was altered in her irresponsible mind. Quick as women are to read each other's souls, she had read

farewell in Juliana's eyes. The secret meant power to the supposed Lady Wroth, if it meant nothing else. It should be kept.

"Don't you know?" she cried gaily, "have you not recognised her? Why, that's one of the rejected—the black dummy?"

Wroth gave a cry like the sob of some wild beast in a trap. He dashed the chair from his way and leaped to the door; the room shook with the violence with which he wrenched it open and flung it behind him.

"Your ladyship has an agreeable life before you," said Scaife drily.

Peggy sent her insolent eyes round the three faces to let them rest upon Martindale's.

"Perhaps," she said, with a little secret sounding laugh.

Wroth had dashed into the hall, to find it empty. He stood a second, hesitating between the stairs on one side and the half-closed street door on the other; then two strides took him into the open. In front rose the gorse-clad hilly common of Mount Ephraim, at that moment quite deserted; but between the moving groups that studded the pavement below he thought to catch the flutter of a black scarf, which, even as he saw it, disappeared into one of the passages leading to the Pantiles. Instantly he started in pursuit. It was a long chase, for when he reached the parade, the black scarf had vanished again—obviously into a shop—and he lost much time in tracking it, only to end in finding that it dangled from the hat of one whom he had never before seen. Baffled, panting, he hastened back to the Crown, scornful of the curiosity and amusement that his bareheaded passage excited among the strollers,

and rushed to knock at the closed window of the office.

"The lady—the lady in black?" he thundered as the glass was lifted. "Pshaw, don't stare like that!—Is there not a foreign lady staying in this hotel? I know there is. Come, give me the book. I'll see for myself."

He snatched the greasy volume that lay on the ledge before him, even as the alarmed landlady, with hesitating hands, sought to withdraw it from his reach. It opened of itself at the last used page.

Wroth gave a half-stifled cry of triumph. In elaborate copperplate handwriting—Annibale, Juliana's courier was vain of his superior education—stood the pompous inscription: "Contessa Mordante di Belgiojoso dei Vespi—Palazzo Mordante, Florence." Thereafter a less artistic pen had entered the additional remark: "with maid and man-servant, arrived April 24th," together with the record of the apartments allotted to so distinguished a visitor "Prince George, bedroom—Princess Sophia, sitting-room. Seringapatam and Bangalore, for attendants."

Wroth drew a deep breath—among all these names of Italy he had read only one, unwritten: "Juliana." He closed the volume quietly and laid it back on the inner ledge of the office.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, "that is all I require."

"The lady has come for the waters, my lord," cried the hostess in a fluster. "I trust your lordship, begging your lordship's pardon, will be so kind as not to intrude upon her in any way. The lady is in mourning, my lord, and——" she broke off before the smile that parted the young man's lips.

"The lady will not be astonished to see me," said Wroth.

It curdled the blood in her veins (as she subsequently assured her husband). "And up the stairs it was with him then, three at a time!—He's not safe, Tunstall, and so I tell you!"

CHAPTER XIV

"Now, in the name of heaven, my lady——" cried Panton.

Juliana turned a white face vaguely towards her maid. With a weary movement she let the purple cloak slip from her shoulders.

"Pack it up, Panton," she said in an extinguished voice. "I shall go back to my mourning."

"My lady!" ejaculated Panton again. Her usual volubility was at a loss before the sense of mysterious and strange event about her. Her mistress stretched out her left hand; and the woman's eyes were instantly riveted on the unknown ring that hung heavily upon that finger whence Juliana had removed the familiar wedding circlet. She looked affrightedly back at the face above it.

"You have heard," said Juliana, in the same toneless way, "of the odd marriage that has taken place in this town to-day?"

The strings of Mrs. Panton's tongue were gladly loosed upon a subject she could tackle:

"Yes, and indeed, my lady! That mad young gentleman with the wolves and bears, and that slut again (saving your ladyship's presence) whom I never could abear, and how she came to be here, turning up like a bad penny, for ever in our way?—unless, indeed," cried the woman, severely, "it is after her you

are again, notwithstanding all that's been and gone, and all this journey and tales of taking the waters a second wildgoose chase after the trollop! Your ladyship's downright sinful—foolish, with your charities and rescues. You'll get naught better out of her now than before——and how she comes to be your ladyship's foster-sister with such a disposition will remain for ever a mystery to me!—aye, I've heard of the wedding this day. A pretty wedding indeed! Has your ladyship been told how those bold, shameless hussies went to be chosen like cattle—and how——?" she paused suddenly in full flow: a curious mirthless smile had parted her mistress's lips.

"Panton—I was the bride!"

"My lady—God save us!"

"And this is my wedding ring."

"Deliver us!" said Mrs. Panton, and sat down suddenly, for the trembling in her limbs.

"No, I did not come here for Peggy: I came for him. I knew no more than you that she was here. She would have married him. . . . I saved him from that! I was wrong. He himself does not know."

"My lady . . .?"

"He may never know. Panton, give me the long gold chain."

Dazed, Mrs. Panton rose from her chair and crept towards the jewel case on the table. In silence she handed the chain and watched her mistress slip the ring upon it, fasten it round her neck and hide it beneath the folds of her bodice. As she did so, rapidly, with dry tongue that scarce could do its office, Juliana gave her old nurse the story of the morning's work. Into the woman's large perturbed countenance the while she listened crept a wholesome red again. Her

eyes began to twinkle. Her lips twitched into a repressed smile.

"It's to be a secret, then, for the present, my lady," she said, with a deep sigh.

"Yes, a dead secret," answered Juliana. "And you may pack again, Panton; for we shall leave to-morrow."

"And where to, my lady?" asked the tirewoman, repressing with some difficulty an obvious remark about her mistress's desire for the waters.

"Where to?" Juliana hesitated. "To my godfather's," she said then with a note of yearning in her voice. "There will be peace with him."

She passed into her little sitting-room, listlessly taking up a book on her way. Mrs. Panton looked after her through the open door, winking and chuckling to herself; ejaculating astonishment upon gusto. She scented romance of the most exciting description. "My lady Wroth, my lady Wroth." For one thing, it had a better sound than that long foreign title in her British ear. And what a personable young man, and how wicked? It is quite in the correct order of things, to the Pantons of this world, that young noblemen should be wicked. They would not give a farthing for virtue. "It was love at first sight," said the woman to herself, "and she's hung his ring over her heart!" She winked and chuckled again.

Juliana's eyes followed the words in the book before her uncomprehendingly. It was the latest publication of Lord Byron's, and all fashionable readers were mad about it. She herself had found much food for her thwarted aspiration in the new poet's coloured flights. But, to-day, it might have been a mathematical treatise for all that it meant for her.

She had read the same lines at least twenty times.

She suddenly raised her head and hearkened. Along the passage there came a hasty tread, which halted before the door. An imperative knock—and before she had time to lay a hand upon her leaping heart, Wroth had entered.

He came swiftly to within a pace of her, and stood looking on her with eyes from which blazed reproach.

"Is it true?" he cried. "Is it true that you were in that room this morning? That you were the woman with the black veil?"

Juliana gazed at him as if fascinated. Silently she inclined her head.

He clapped his hands together with a loud outcry.

"Then you are free! You, you in whom I had believed!"

The utter misery of the exclamation, the very fierceness of his wrath, brought balm into Juliana's wounded soul. Her hand crept up to her wedding ring.

"You are free!" repeated he violently, "and now it is I who am bound! . . . What fiend drove you to come and mock me, if you did mean to reveal yourself?"

"I came to save you," said Juliana. Something seemed to speak for her. In the turmoil that possessed her, she was hardly conscious of formulating the words. Her thought seemed to utter itself.

"You came to save me!" he repeated, while another step brought him menacingly close to her, "and, when you saw . . . what you saw, you did not think me worth the word! O, God preserve me from a good woman!—What! you shared with me that unforgettable hour, you gave yourself to me—you did!——" his voice

surged as if beating down on an unspoken protest, "you did, deny it if you dare—as no woman ever gave herself to man before, by the most sacred abandonment of the spirit. And you were free, you knew where to find me . . . and you never even wrote to me! We were together again this very day, and you never spoke! You let me go from you, let me prostitute my name, my honour, our love; let me sell myself, and you, and our happiness, for money—O, false! And then when it is done you come and taunt me with your unveiled countenance! Heavens, if you did not so possess me, I could kill you! But no, you shall not die, you shall live, and live for me!"

He flung himself on his knees beside her, his arms about her.

She had trembled under the tempest of his words, thrilled to his passion, exquisitely rejoiced at his despair. But all her chaste womanhood woke within her at these last words and at the touch he dared to lay upon her. Not thus—it could not be thus! Here was something which no man had offered her before—eyes that shone with unholy fire, arms that trembled and grasped, lips that would have cursed and kissed together. It was not to bring him to this that she had humbled herself. She had thought to save him; and lo! here, claiming her, was something less than man, little more than brute; claiming her whom he had called Una, her before whom the wolf itself had crouched.

She made no struggle in his clasp, but it seemed to him as if she had turned to marble. He released her with a smothered oath; then half rose pausing, one knee still on the ground, to measure her with a brutal arrogant gaze.

"And to think!" he exclaimed with a laugh, "that

I let you go from me that night, at the Abbey! Oh, my dear, the long days, the wonderful hours we have wasted!"

Juliana cried out as if he had struck her.

"Wroth . . . !"

That night—that place where their hands had not even met—it all rose before her with its sacred memory, and she thought her heart must break to hear it profaned!

"You were mine. From the first instant we met, I deemed you a kind of spirit, deemed you something too ineffable to approach with aught but the spirit. I had a spirit for you, Juliana, a virgin fire. But now I know you otherwise—mere substance, as the rest of women, timid, vain, curious, ready to play with a man's passion and warm yourself at its flame . . . always taking heed yourself not to be burned! O, you are free—and it might have been!" His voice rose again with an echo of the plaint she had known in the hour of the Tenebrae; and it smote her afresh with mingled sorrows. "It might have been . . . but your soul is no mate for mine. Had it been so, straight you would have come to me as I to you, once the cage bars broken. But, after all"—his accents changed again, a bitter smile was on his lip, he scorned himself and her even as he spoke—"I am flesh and blood too; and, before the Lord, I never saw the woman that was made for me till you shone out on me. Give me your hands, give me your lips, and then deny, if you dare, that you are mine!"

She rose abruptly, quivering from the horrible conflict in herself, and pointed to the door, with the voiceless word—"Go!" He sprang to his feet likewise, and once again his arms hovered about her. Panting in her ear, his tone had dropped to the tender

huskiness that had the power to stir her to the innermost fibre.

"O come with me!—What will all the world be to us, once we are together? Italy is your country, you told me—come with me to Italy, my Juliet—Wife?" he cried wildly, "you shall be my love, 'tis a hundred times better."

"Indeed," said Juliana, finding voice and strength at last, "I have already heard you, my lord, speak about a wife."

Once again his arms fell away from her. Steel could not have been more cutting, ice colder, than her tone; the dead more unresponsive to his touch. He fell back a step, his eyes with their evil fire upon her. She was minded of the phosphorescent glare in the eyes of the wolf. So, this was all she was to him—something that called up the beast within him!

"Lord Wroth," she said, "by stretching out my hand I can ring the bell, by raising my voice I can summon my servant from the next room. I do neither, for I know that you will leave me."

A change came upon him, he cast a furtive glance at the bell rope, another at the door. The fire flickered and dropped in his eyes. Another second he stared in blank despair upon her; then with a sudden frantic gesture, flung his arms high in the air, shook them above his head and let them fall. He took two steps to the door, wheeled round again on the threshold.

"You are mine," he said in a new voice, low, threatening, yet controlled. "I shall never give you up. You shall never belong to anybody else."

Pride spoke, not love. Pride and an indomitable will. Juliana swayed, as the door closed upon him,

and sank into a chair—broken, stunned. She was unable to face the image of her own shame and desolation. Presently she became aware that Panton was beside her. The touch of the warm, womanly hands, the sound of the comfortable voice stirred some tender fibre in her paralysis of misery. Juliana, who had scarce wept since childhood, clung to her old nurse with sobs and tears; and Mrs. Panton, forgetting all her dignity as tirewoman, soothed and petted her with the "lambs" and "chucks" of baby days.

"Oh, Panton, you heard, you heard?" cried Juliana.

"And, indeed," said Panton, still patting the lustrous hair, "I thought your ladyship was mortal unkind to the poor young nobleman—so you were, my lamb, when you could have made him so happy, just by a word. Not indeed that it will do him any harm to be kept waiting a bit, since there was so little courting—every woman should have her courting. But, eh, dear, my dove—how the man loves you, to be sure!"

"He love me!" cried Juliana, her eyes flashing in scorn through their tears. "He offered me shame, insult!"

"Tut, tut," said philosophic Panton, "he wants you at any price. And," she added, "it would come a deal harder on you, my deary, if he didn't."

Juliana shuddered. She was not given to introspection, to subtle theorising, or even to parleying with conscience. Hers was a large simple nature, and it was the soul, not the mind, that guided it. That soul saw but two alternatives: right or wrong. And its innate rectitude had known no hesitation between them,

hitherto. But now, what was right seemed wrong —what was legally right was morally wrong. Above all, her proud womanhood revolted from the outrage she had suffered, the more fiercely that something within her yet cried out to him like a wailing child.

His stress of passion drove Wroth blindly to seek the open air. He rushed out of the house that had this morning held such monstrous experiences for him, crossed the road and strode swiftly up the steep slopes of the common, towards Mount Ephraim, seeking nothing for the moment but the physical relief of action. Up through the brambly winding paths he went, unconscious of aught but the whirl of his thoughts; as blind to the sunshine and spring cheer as he was deaf to the lark's song above his head and oblivious of the pungent scent of the gorse. He stamped hardy prickles and all kinds of delicate spring growths alike beneath his riding-boots as he swung along—halting at last at the foot of some giant boulders, to regain breath.

The little town nestled cosily below; and beyond it was a fair view—folds upon folds of pastures, slopes of modest hills with greening wood spreading to faint in purple uplands, far away, against the sky. The beauty of the scene bit at his heart as he looked. Under those tiled gables, in yonder cup of the valley, was Juliana—Juliana, aye, and the woman he had just married! Rapture and disgust! He flung himself upon the grey stone; and, with his chin upon his hand sat long, staring upon his misery, lost to all sense of time, to all consecutive thought or purpose.

When he roused himself at length, he could not

have said whether he had spent on that stone minutes only or hours of profitless contemplation; but the sun was already low, and the world was losing its colour. The spur of action was at his flank again: he must down once more to that house of tragic comedy, and again take up his part.

As he re-entered the banquet room, he swept a look of black inquiry about him—of the meagre wedding party, only two sat now at the board, Scaife and Sir Thomas, with a fresh bottle before them, and heads close together, so engrossed over a dice-box that they had not a look to spare for the new-comer. For a moment the bridegroom surveyed them in silence. Then, stretching out his hand, he snapped the dice-box from Scaife, who was just holding it poised between two fingers for a fresh throw.

"Hallo!" exclaimed the latter, and flung up a furious face, which cleared, however, at sight of the offender—cleared with a malicious pleasure, which was reflected on the countenance of his companion.

"Gad—'tis the bridegroom! By my soul, 'tis the bridegroom! Congratulate you," said Sir Thomas, culling in his turn the box from Wroth's hand—"congratulate you, my dear boy, with all my heart!"

He laughed as he shook the dice, his eyes still on Wroth's face.

"My throw," said Scaife, "excuse me, Wroth."

He shook, threw, and cursed. And Holroyd flinging himself back in his chair, laughed again consumedly. Wroth frowned ever more heavily. A short while ago this sort of laughter had been his.

"What are you laughing at? Being my friend, I suppose you laugh because I've just put through the

most damnable piece of folly ever a man blasted his life with. What are you laughing at? Because I, Wroth, Wroth, have tied a millstone round my neck?"

Scaife brought two languid palms together, twice.

"Very well done, George! By gad, you'd have made an actor!"

"How?" cried Holroyd, suddenly stopping in his cachinnation to prick an alert ear. "How? You don't mean to say it was planned? That it was all a got-up thing? . . . Oh, oh!"—He succumbed again to rich mirth, ejaculating at intervals: "Gad, the joke is complete—and Martindale too! Gad, you're both actors! As for her ladyship—why, 'tis her profession. Aha, collared grandpapa's money bags, obliged a friend, rid yourself of a wife. Everyone pleased all round! O, gad! Gad! Hold me, somebody, or I shall split."

"Stop that talk, or I'll kill you!" exclaimed Wroth.

He turned a look of livid fury from man to man.

"O dem!" said Scaife wearily, "let's get on with our game. Go away, Wroth, there's a dear fellow. Go and champ somewhere else, and let us get on with our game. We were tossing which shall have the riding of that bay mare of yours, while this fine open weather lasts."

"Where's Martindale?" said Wroth, in a low dry voice.

"He's gone off with your wife—as you know quite as well as we do," retorted Scaife acidly. "Your millstone is comfortably rolling away, away to London. Now, sit down and drink, there's my good lad! Tom, you throw."

Yet a little while Wroth paused, looking at them. He had been their complacent host, month after month; his coffers, his cellar, his stables—theirs, to use and misuse. He had been king of revels, prince of friends; and, when material ruin menaced, none could leave the sinking ship fast enough—but it was only now, when moral ruin encompassed him, that he measured to the full the value of his boon companions.

Martindale was gone with the woman who now bore the name of Wroth—Martindale whom, alone among his comrades, he had taken into his real friendship; whose weak defection he had even just forgiven; who owed him (pah! that he should remember it!) bounties as endless as they had been delicate. And these two, his month-long guests, threw meanwhile for his best horse. For his honour, his degradation that had nothing but laughter and sneers. A physical passion of anger seized him—a rage of destruction. He knew what he had to do; it could not too quickly be done.

He turned on his heel and went without a word. Presently the gamblers, through the window, hearing him call peremptorily for his curricle, his groom—and his pistol case—dropped the thread of their game, to look at each other, startled, stirred by a not disagreeable curiosity.

"What the deuce is Wroth up to?" said Holroyd the talkative. "You never can tell with the fellow. After his frenzy in the vestry and that pretty wedding speech, one might have betted all one was worth that he wanted to be rid of the woman. But gad, man, the fellow looked murder, didn't you think, just now? And hark to him!" he added, jerking his head towards the window.

"Wroth is wedded to pistols," said the other sententiously, "he'll never divorce them. And, as for what he wants, dem it, you shall have it in five words — Wroth always wants, what he has not got!"

CHAPTER XV

WROTH seized the pistol case from the hands of his bewildered groom and flung it under the seat of the high curricle which stood awaiting his pleasure in the yard. A couple of stablemen stood at the horses' heads; the chestnuts were all quivering impatience—offended at their long wait harnessed in the yard—and wilder than usual, this day, with the heady spring winds. He swung himself up and stood poised, gathering the reins, as the Greek charioteer might have stood before the start.

"Which way did the lady and gentleman take?" he asked abruptly.

There was a grin about the ostlers' faces—reflected on those of inquisitive groups gathered about the stable gates.

"Mr. Martindale, my lord?" inquired an impudent stable boy. And hands went up to divers mouths.

"Aye, Mr. Martindale," said Wroth, culling the whip from its socket. "Mr. Martindale and Lady Wroth."

The horses leaped as his fingers tightened on the reins; struck fury from the cobbles with ringing iron. Wroth, sitting now, held them with a grip that no one could have suspected in the white, almost effeminate-looking hand. He turned his dark look from face to face: and somehow the humour of the situation

in the eyes of the bystanders seemed to have evaporated. Two or three voices answered with sycophantic eagerness.

"The London road, my lord."

The groom had barely the time to leap and clutch like a wild cat, before, in a whirlwind, they were off, shearing the corner "with a knife edge between them and slap-bang," as the head ostler concisely remarked; squawking fowls and terrified children scattering, dogs barking, the light curricle swaying from side to side; Wroth's figure pulsing, as it were, to the bounding rhythm of his horses' speed which he fiercely encouraged and as fiercely controlled.

The town constable on the lower walk had but the time to step aside, with a haste little becoming his dignity, ere the curricle was upon him and past. He gazed after it as it disappeared round the corner, and shook his head long and solemnly. It might come hard on the honest lad who had to sit by my lord; but the sooner Mad Wroth broke his neck, the better for the credit of the country.

As they dashed out on the high road and settled to a pace scarcely abated, but steadier and less fraught with imminent danger, the seething fury in Wroth's brain, so far from diminishing, increased; took, so to speak, many colours, gathered a specious kind of intellectual purpose without losing its sheer animal ferocity. He was drunk with rage as a man may be with strong wine; with a drunkenness stimulating to brilliancy of thought, intensity of purpose, recklessness of consequences. It was a threefold rage; against himself, for the futility, being what he was, of the deed that had wrecked him; against Juliana, who had failed him at the very hour when, by a gesture, she could have saved him; against his friends—friends, save the mark!—in

whose degradation he saw his own. These vile minds, how quick they had been to assume him in collusion with the creatures—the woman and Martindale. With their own mire they pelted him; base, they judged him at their own level!

Up the steepest hill he never spared the chestnuts for a breathing space. Indeed, he soon found himself not restraining but urging. His cattle no longer fought for the pace, but only responded to the call. For Wroth, usually soft-hearted, even to the mockery of his friends, with dumb animals had no mercy this day. The hedges flew by; then high park walls, tree-topped; hamlets with their thatched cottages; a copse of pine trees engulfed them into brown shadows, to spit them forth again to a blaze of sunshine upon the rolling downs where the gorse was already breaking into yellow. And now, before they had left the last heather land, it was swept by the April storm. The wind came whistling unchecked across the rolling waste and caught them in full blast; the rain struck slantwise, stinging—a petulant squall with all the cruelty of the young year in it—buffeted and drenched. But at the very pitch of fury its own impetuosity tore the clouds apart. Here was blue sky again, here was a shaft of sunshine, mellower than before. And in a trice, the land was one sparkle, one jubilation of nodding leaf and singing birds; pools smiling at the sky and the odour of the wet earth fragrant on a wind, warm again, as if laughing at its own outburst. Vaguely, through the concentration of his thoughts, Wroth had felt the gloom of the squall deepen his dark mood, the chill whipping of the rain drive his bitterness into more corrosive irony.

Presently the groom, tilting his drenched hat over his eyes to shade them from the sudden dazzle, started and touched his master on the arm:

"They're in front of us, my lord!" he cried, pointing.

Wroth's mind, fixed on the inward vision, awoke to reality. They had reached the edge of a slope which dipped gently into the valley where smoked the townlet of Sevenoaks, its slate roofs glistening in the already level rays, already mellowing to the amber that foretells the rose. Some half-mile off, down the straight running road, crawled in truth the bulk of a travelling chaise. Wroth's red hazel eyes were as keen of vision as a hawk's. He gave a short laugh.

"The off grey's dead lame—they'll have to pull up here. So, so, my lads, we can take it easy!"

He had no mind to have his meeting on the open road; four walls should hold that scene of vengeance that he had been drawing in flaming lines on the tablets of his mind.

The chestnuts craned their necks and stretched in relief against the loosened reins as they fell to walking pace. Clouds of steam broke from them. Wroth laid his whip alternately on either wet flank, in caress. The man, encouraged by this sign of returning humanity, ventured to glance at his master's face, but quickly looked away again from the smile that lifted the short upper lip.

At the head of the little High Street, Wroth drew rein and sat watching, still with his ominous smile, while the chaise, with a kind of pathetic unconsciousness in its shabby weather-beaten back, lumbered onwards and turned into the yard of the Blue Boar, the sign of which swung and creaked gaily from its post, high planted in the middle of the little square.

"We'll give them a minute or two to settle down comfortably," said he half aloud, and thought: "If I know my Martindale, he'll be for a bottle and a rest by

the fire before he starts again. Romeo's throat must be pretty dry, cursing the off grey's legs!"

Thus, he remained a minute or two, statue-like, while the horses craned necks and shuddered and rubbed confidential noses, steaming still more densely in the sun-glow. Then, with a suddenness that nearly flung the groom from his seat, they were off again, this time with clatter and dash; and Wroth swept the curve into the yard of the posting-house with that masterly precision and audacity which made his driving the admiration of every stable in the country.

The Blue Boar had a reputation on the road for its burnt sherry; and a very exhilarating brew had just been deposited between Miss Beljoy and Mr. Martindale, as they sat, in all the comfort that Wroth had foreseen, before the fire in the travellers' room. If ill-temper there had been, it was smoothed away.

They had the room to themselves. Martindale, delicately holding a hot tumbler in a twisted pocket-handkerchief, winked as he sipped a toast to the bright eyes opposite to him.

"'Pon honour, Peggie," he cried, glancing at the pearl-grey sandals, "it is a vast of time since we've seen you dance. I'll get a party of choice fellows. Dash me if we don't——"

"Dash you, then, and you won't," said the lady, tossing her blue feather at him with great assurance.

Dance for him, and his kind, indeed! So long as she played the part of Lady Wroth, Miss Beljoy had highly different notions of entertainment. She was too good an actress not to sink herself into her new character. She had visions of drives in the park in a high barouche, of elegant entertainments, where her languid white hand would be kissed by adoring and

respectful swains. An ill-treated, irresistible lady of rank—that was her *rôle* now.

Juliana had promised that whatever happened she should be at no loss. Peggie had no idea of the kind of settlements likely to be made upon a nobleman's wife; but she was nothing if not sanguine. She was convinced she would have the spending of much gold, and—whether as Lady Wroth or Miss Beljoy—she intended to spend it to some purpose. Dance for Mr. Martindale—Master Martindale, the impecunious! What airs of conqueror was the creature giving himself? He might serve as escort, he might serve as fetch and carry; best of all, he might serve as spur of defiance to Wroth, but as for anything else, he must be taught his place.

"I'd be obleeged," said Miss Beljoy presently, and now in elegant mincing tones, "if you will hand me my glass, Mr. Martindale — I think the liquor is sufficiently cool. Dear me——"

The languid ejaculation expired on her lips: the door at the far end of the room had opened, and Wroth, closing it quietly behind him, was advancing towards them. The couple by the fire gaped in the silence of utter astonishment, Martindale still foolishly holding his wrapped glass, Peggie collecting her wits with all speed for the contradictory situations she might be called upon to face; ready to laugh, as jolly Peg, at the trick she had played on my lord and them all, or as Lady Wroth, the party first injured in an equivocal transaction, to take her proper stand of reproachful dignity.

As Wroth advanced she marked his smile.

"He knows," thought Peggie, and gave herself all to the first *rôle*, in swift disappointment; the other game would have been so much more amusing.

Then his eye fell upon her and all at once she was frightened, and wished herself miles away. Her intuitions, being feminine, were quicker than those of her companion. Mr. Martindale's air of consternation had vanished; here was Wroth, cool as a cucumber, all smiles. And, hang it, was he not doing Wroth a good turn?

"Capital, dear fellow, capital!" he cried boisterously. "Come after us to give us 'speed'? Gad, but it's just like you! We'll have a fresh bowl up—why not supper all three together, eh, Peg? Eh, George? You always liked to be original: you'll break your record this time!"

"You forget," said Peggie, thinly goaded by the very sharpness of her fear into the extreme of audacity, "that Lord Wroth can endure all other company except that of a—wife."

"But when he knows that he's already free of her?" said Martindale, still rollicking.

He swallowed his reeking draught, nodded at the girl over his glass, slammed it on the table, and blew a kiss at her. Then he turned his flushed face, claiming his boon companion's applause. His eye became fixed, his jaw dropped. That little polished mahogany box hanging by its silver handle on two of Wroth's fingers—he knew it well enough. What the devil was the madman doing with it here?

Wroth read his thoughts like a printed page. He glanced down at the case, swung it on the table and was shaken with his short harsh laugh, the laugh that never boded good. The white fury that possessed him seemed to flicker about his face like a dancing flame as he turned again the glitter of his eyes from one to the other.

Martindale, his friend, and the creature who could

now call herself Lady Wroth! And he, already hailed, by the Scaifes and the Holroyds, as their accomplice! He pushed the catch of his case and raised the lid. At that moment he was no more responsible for his actions than the madman Martindale deemed him. He had killed Martindale in his thoughts, before his finger touched his loaded pistol. But something—perhaps Peggie's piercing scream, perhaps her comrade's abject movement of fear, perhaps the familiar touch of the grip under his hand — brought him in time to a realisation of the chasm before him.

He replaced the weapon on the table, still uncocked, and stood a second, his gaze dilated, breathing quickly, looking on the vision of the fatal deed which he had all but done.

"Oh, mercy, mercy!" gasped Peggie. She tried to scream again, yet as in a nightmare could scarce bring forth a whisper; fighting against the faintness that was creeping over her, she wanted to cry out the truth, since this joke of hers was bringing such dire consequence. But the words refused themselves to her thoughts.

"Good Lord, George!" ejaculated Martindale, from dry lips. "Ring the bell, woman! Dash it, ring, I say, Peg! It's your side, you fool! We shall be murdered!"

Wroth stirred from his abstraction.

"Oh no, not murder," he said tonelessly. "An affair between gentlemen, for we are gentlemen, are we not? You'll not deny me satisfaction, Martindale, I suppose?"

Though his voice was dully emotionless, there was twitching of indescribable irony about his lips.

"The present is the best of all times. You never were much good at more than ten paces. Why not

the length of the room between us? Come, choose your pistol, man. I'm in a hurry. Let us be done with it!"

But Martindale, rolling an anguished eye upon the speaker, crawling as if the mere change of position across the hearthrug must attract the bullet, was already extending a palsied hand towards the bell-rope.

A sudden nausea seized Wroth. What was he, lion, doing among these jackals? How could he, eagle, stoop to those jays? A vision of Juliana's face arose before him, a vision of purple, deep eyes, sorrowful in scorn. And, as if by the light of that gaze, he saw the irrevocable gulf that separated his own soul from that of those with whom he had chosen to consort. As upon a huge gathering wave, he felt himself seized and lifted back to the rock where he belonged. Disgust was upon him as he looked down.

"You need not ring," he cried peremptorily. "I'll let you off. I'll cry quits, now and for ever. I've had my revenge. Faugh, you're not even worth shooting, Martindale! Stay—there's a condition—you and my lady there must separate."

Martindale made a hasty step forward. Wroth flung up his hand:

"You need make no promise," he cried contemptuously. "You dare not do anything but leave her, now. As for you, my lady, I make no apologies for interfering, even after our bargain. The world is wide; remember not to let your favour fall upon any of those who have broken bread with me. I give you credit for better taste in the future: you see the stuff they are made of."

There was sharp warning under the mockery of his

tone. The pistol case clicked. Wroth clapped it under his arm and turned to the door. A moment he halted on the threshold, looked back at them, as if from some great distance, then went out.

The two left alone stared at each other; anger, but anger of different moods was in the eyes of both. Then Martindale hastily helped himself to the remnants of the bowl and drank at a gulp. Some of his jauntiness returned to him as he flipped the moisture from his lips with his fine handkerchief.

"Well, Peg, what a scene! Aha! Why, I declare, you're scared to death. Come, now, pull yourself together, girl."

He hemmed, drew a deep breath, and tried to assume an air at once superior and generous. "Not that I care for the dear fellow's threats. It is obvious that all this business has been too much for him. But you can trust me. I would not, for worlds, place you in an awkward position. Rather than cause difficulties——" He hemmed again. A graceful exit seemed difficult.

Peggie, her hands on the arm of her chair, sat staring at him, strangely still.

"You wish me to go, I see," he cried, catching at a pretext, with the suddenness of a trout at a fly. Still the dumb staring of the pale green eyes.

"Come, then," said the gallant. "A wink is as good as a nod to me. I'm going. Good-bye, my dear——" He hesitated. Something was wanting to give conviction and dash to his new *rôle*. A defiance to Wroth that could involve no risk. "Come, Peg—a kiss before parting."

He came towards her. She flung up her hand; all fierce energy now, out of her stony abstraction.

"Off with you—I hate the sight of you! I don't

know how I could ever have looked at you. Kiss you? And I his wife! Ah, he can't help that now. I am his wife——"

The sense of the huge lie, the hopelessness of her own position, overcame the girl, even as she spoke the word. She saw again before her the vision of Wroth, scorning. Only some hours ago she had pleaded for her chance; "I like him, I do like him!" she had cried. And her chance had been wrenched from her. And now she knew it was no mere liking. Love? She had never loved in her life before. Was it love?

Now the dry heart was seized with misery. This was love; how uncomfortable it was! She crouched down, burying her face in her hands and broke into furious sobs.

Martindale slipped out noiselessly.

CHAPTER XVI

WROTH drove back towards the Wells, at a slow, steady trot, absorbed in his thoughts and allowing the tired horses their own pace.

At first, chief in his mind was wide sweeping resolve: he was done with it, done with that old life, done with these boon companions, these gamblers, drunkards, panderers, sycophants—aye, and traitors! It was hardly so much a decision as an accomplished fact within himself. And next the manner of its accomplishment began to shape itself in a hundred busy plans. The price of his folly was in a way his release; material means for his complete freedom could not now fail him. He would purge his house and his stables. That old devil, Minchin, must be set at once to pay off all debts. The Abbey, empty of its unworthy crew, should be left in the guardianship of Bertram. . . . Aye, faithful old fellow, he should have the satisfaction of feeling peace as well as plenty about him again.

And, since his money-bags were to be so deep, why should he not now plunge deep into them? He would have the desecrated church restored—by the Lord, he would! One day, he meant to bring Juliana back there: how and when he knew not—he was still in the whirlwind of circumstances—but he knew that, henceforth, this would be the goal of his life. There was nothing else in the world for him.

He had once more reached the downs; the sun had dropped behind low-lying clouds; after the rain, through the cooling airs, the mists were rising; with the twilight hour the wind had fallen; it was a dull grey world that held him. Wroth suddenly gathered up the reins with the old fierce grip. The horses sprang; it needed no stroke of whip to make them feel afresh the frenzy of impatience that urged.

Juliana was at the Wells yonder, and here was he on the downs, miles from her! What blasting folly of anger and pride had come to him that, having found her again, he had let her go out of his sight? What, he had had his arms about her, and had not held her! Because of that look in her eyes he had gone from her. Oh, then, when he was back again beside her he would close his own eyes to that look. Once they had kissed, he knew it in every fibre of his being, she could never put him from her again. Then, gradually, the current of his passion took a gentler turn. Nay, no woman had ever been wooed as she should be. So gently would he lay siege to this fair fortress, that she should scarce know the moment of her surrender.

The high curricle swayed again as they spun along the darkening roads. The over-driven horses had taken to a gallop. Crouching cottages, with glimmers as of yellow eyes, seemed to dart past them. There were curses and outcry in the village, where knots of labourers scattered and flattened themselves against palings to let the flying danger pass. At last! Down the broader road into the Wells! The sense of the goal near-reached added a fresh stimulus to the reckless pace.

The same whirlwind that had taken him away seemed to have brought him back. When he drew up before the door of the Crown, there was a dash

among the idlers from the bar room, to stare at Mad Wroth returning from his mad chase; and wide were the conjectures that flew from lip to lip at sight of his white face and the reeking horses.

"He's killed them both—that's what he's done! We shall have work at Maidstone 'Sizes," was the most popular conclusion.

The bridegroom pushed through the groups into the narrow passage, so possessed by his purpose as to be unaware of the curiosity and excitement about him. He merely halted a second to fling out an order to his groom, then hurried on again, and, at the office, peremptorily demanded a room.

The young person with the wonderful ringlets, who at that moment there presided, was much too interested in the mad, bad lord to depute to anyone the task of showing him the apartment. On the threshold of the room allotted to him, without even casting a glance upon its merits, he paused:

"Will you kindly tell the lady—the Countess what's her name, Countess Mordante something—who is staying here that I will present myself in her sitting-room immediately. I, Lord Wroth, you understand, wish to call upon the lady. Oh, never stare like that, woman! Go at once, do you hear? Yes, yes, the room will do. Take my message."

"But, my lord——"

"She'll drive me crazy! Here, girl, will this help you to understand?" He fumbled furiously in his pocket, then thrust a gold piece into her hand. She stared at it, and then at him; then held out the guinea again, and with an agreeable smile:

"But the lady's gone, my lord!" she said, mincing.

Wroth, who had moved to enter his room, turned suddenly back with a leap.

"Gone?"

"Yes, indeed, my lord, quite an hour ago. Mr. Tunstall had a deal of trouble to get horses for her chaise—so many gentlemen had been ordering horses, your lordship will understand. But she was very insistent, very insistent indeed, and did not mind the expense—so she said. She must go, at once, said she."

The girl gazed into the blasted face with a thrill of the deepest enjoyment. "Pray, my lord, allow me to return this money. I really could not——"

But her genteel protest was lost in space. He had thrust her from his path. Not roughly—no, indeed, she was subsequently wont to relate that he took her by the shoulders as he would a child. She heard him clattering down the turning stairs, heard his voice uplifted in outcry for the landlord, before she recovered from her astonishment. She ran to the landing and leaned over the banister, all eagerness.

Mr. Tunstall's answer rang in tones of sullenness unprecedented in his dealings with customers of quality. The grand foreign lady had taken sudden departure; and Mrs. Tunstall averred that it was all due to my lord's intrusion upon her: she had foreseen it—she had even warned his lordship! Now, they had lost the best guest of the season, and Mr. Tunstall's dudgeon was as apparent as he well dared to display it.

"I could hardly take upon myself to say for certain, my lord, but I gathered from the Countess's courier that they were for Dover."

"Dover."

That single word was in Wroth's voice.

"Aye, my lord—going on to the Continent. First stop Maidstone."

"Maidstone——"

Without further parley Wroth called for his reckoning, for fresh horses to his curricle. Here there ensued a sudden wrangle. There were no horses, none to be had in the town to-night, for love or money. It had been as much as they could do to find them for the Countess. The last pair had been taken by his lordship's gentlemen friends back to the Abbey. Their own greys Mr. Martindale and the lady—here the landlord coughed and stammered—

"Then let my chestnuts be put to again. A pint of wine each to their oats."

Mr. Tunstall, who was a lover of horseflesh, protested, deeply reproachful. It was murder to take the beauties out of the stables again to-night. They'd been driven cruel. He'd not be a man if he did not say so. Now, to-morrow morning—

"Where do you put up at Maidstone?"

"The Swan, my lord, but——"

The young imperative voice flung out the fiat:

"They shall take me to Maidstone to-night."

One of the chestnuts went dead lame before they had left the Wells three miles behind—and an hour was lost in getting as far as Kipping Cross. Leaving the groom in charge of the suffering beast and the curricle at the village pot-house, with orders to return on the morrow to the Abbey, Wroth started off alone, riding the other horse, bare back, with a makeshift of curtailed reins.

It was a gloomy night, and the mists had increased; dank, clammy, they soaked a man to the skin in imperceptible moisture. He missed his way more than once on the solitary roads ever branching into unknown directions, and it was nearly midnight when he reached

Maidstone. There it required all his masterfulness to arouse the folk at the Swan Inn; and a fantastic sum of money to obtain a saddle-horse in exchange for his own, on which to continue the journey forthwith: the travelling party with the foreign courier had halted for supper, he heard, but had posted on for Dover, by Canterbury.

At Key Street, at Faversham, at Canterbury, through the remainder of the night, the experience and the proceedings were much the same. But determination backed by a well-filled purse will carry any traveller on, even through these dead hours when the passing guest is resented rather than welcomed by the most grasping host. As the dawn whitened to the left, Wroth began to taste the salt air on his lips. His road was now climbing the inland slope of those white cliffs which gave Albion her name. Soon the land broke and fell away before him, under the lowering of the sky spread the sullen swell of the sea.

His last mount was a heavy clumping brute which neither hand nor heel could urge beyond a sullen trot. By the time he had left the downs behind him, and jogged as far as the outskirts of Dover, a raw wind had sprung up and cleared the fog; and it was broad day. The clouds hung low, threatening, trailing off seaward, dipping jagged edges here and there. The church clock was striking eight when he dismounted at the door of the Royal.

"The packet, sir?" cried the waiter, looking with a blank, uninterested eye from the mud-stained rider to his reeking steed. "Why, she's gone this half-hour. Ebb-tide at seven, sir."

Imperiously, Wroth darted his questions.

Aye, the waiter replied, between smothered yawns —there had been a lady and her maid, and a jabbering

fellow of a foreigner. Breakfast they had had, then off with them. And a bit of tossing they were now enjoying, there was not a doubt of that.

It was in the dingy coffee-room, and the man pointed with a flip of his professional napkin towards the window. Wroth stepped into the bow, and looked out on the restless grey of the channel beyond the pier. Livid white, the sails of the retreating packet were painted against the gloom of sea and sky—no larger than gulls' wings. The wind was fair for France; she was making good speed.

He stared forth on the dismal picture a long while in silence. The waiter coughed, moved a chair, flicked crumbs from the table. Luggageless, unimportant as the traveller seemed, his eye commanded respect, his voice obtained obedience.

"Breakfast, sir?" insinuated the man at last.

Wroth wheeled round, drew a pocket-book from his breast, ran a finger through the rustle of what remained of Mr. Minchin's notes, and glanced again seaward. His lips moved silently as if in calculation. Then he closed the leather case again, thrust it into his pocket, and with an air of sudden decision:

"Aye, breakfast!" he cried. "And order a post chaise—for London. And mind you, fellow, I like my coffee served hot, and my horses quick."

The waiter withdrew, deeply impressed with the glimpse of wealth he had seen between the strange gentleman's fingers, while Wroth let himself fall into a chair, with a dumb curse on his limited funds. A paltry couple of hundred. It was no use. With only a couple of hundred more he might have chartered a light vessel for himself, started in chase of the gull's wings, caught Juliana, if not on Calais pier itself, at least before she'd left the town. But now he must back to London. He

would overtake her in time; no fear about that, but first of all he must have unlimited funds.

"Is the landlord about?" he asked, when the waiter returned with the steaming tray. "Yes? Then ask him to be good enough to speak to me for a moment. Say it is Lord Wroth, of Hurley Abbey."

And when the host, with all alacrity, had presented himself:

"When will the packet leave, the day after to-morrow?" asked his noble guest.

"Wind permitting, at the turn of the tide, my lord. That is half-past nine, my lord—God willing."

"I shall be back," said Wroth; "to-morrow night you will kindly retain room for a carriage on board—in my name—and passage for me and my servant. And stay—— To whom must one apply for leave to use the Admiralty telegraph for private messages?"

"The harbour-master, my lord."

Wroth scribbled a note and sent it forth with his compliments.

"Put the amount down in my bill," he added affably; "but do me the favour to see that it is transmitted as early as possible."

Then he applied himself to his much-needed repast.

Not one jot was his purpose altered by this check; only his fevered heat had left him. He was set into steadiness, and his brain active in forming practical plans. He was not cast down, his will was too firmly made up for that. It was perhaps even as well, he thought to himself, that this mad chase should be interrupted; she could not now escape him, he knew her name, he knew her home.

An hour later he started on his backward journey. The great arms of the semaphore along the Dover road were waving an imperative despatch to Mr. Minchin in

the city; an express courier was galloping with a letter to Sebastien Picard, his French valet, at Hurley Abbey, ordering that worthy to come and await his master's pleasure at "The Royal," Dover, and to bring the travelling curricle with him, everything ready for a foreign tour, within thirty-six hours. A kind of placidity was upon him as he lay back in the coach. Suspense was, so far, over, in that his course was now clearly defined, and that the next few days could only hold the uneventful details of preparation and pursuit. After rehearsing his schemes in his mind, he set himself very deliberately to sleep. And sleep he did with but the intervals for meals and change of horses, for most of the hours that took him from the coast to London Bridge.

The athlete's body is his trained servant, and it will respond to the emergency. Wroth's night in the saddle; his previous night of mingled conviviality and lonely vigil; all the storms of passion that had shaken him these thirty-six hours; his agony of self-contempt; his corrosive bitterness; the shock of recognition, mingled joy and torture; his thwarted tenderness and the struggle between good and evil in murderous rage; the recurrent disappointments of the chase—a stronger frame than his might have been broken by it all! But as the birds have, for that effort which keeps them poised in prolonged flight, a strength of heart not vouchsafed to creatures bound to earth, so this man, despite his reckless tempers and wasted youth, had that something which marked him rare amongst his kind; that strength which in the artist makes the genius, in the man of action the conqueror; which was to make of him the lover.

The sun was setting in a crimson sky of good

weather promise, and generously tinging the waters of old Thames, when he alighted from the coach on the Southwark side of London Bridge. Glad to stretch his limbs after seven hours of steady posting, he crossed over and made his way rapidly towards Bishopsgate.

CHAPTER XVII

When Mr. Minchin, in the trim, discreet little house within Great St. Helen's, where he kept his business offices on the ground floor, and his studiously cosy bachelor establishment on the two stories above, received the despatch from the erratic nobleman, on whose fortunes he had staked so much, he was already in no very pleasant humour. Hitherto rectitude of conduct had been not only part of his intellectual system, but the very essence of his professional pride. He had now—no denying the fact—departed from the rigidly straight course. In his person, a firm of immaculate tradition had been privy to an equivocal act, as he continued painfully to phrase it to himself. The excitement of the fight was over, the great stake was won; but the flush of triumph had faded and reaction had set in. Mr. Minchin, these thirty-six hours, had had time to think. It was in vain that he told himself that desperate cases demand desperate remedies; that the magnitude of the end justified the means; that, even as Crown ministers and generals in warfare have no right to be squeamish at crucial moments, neither was the lawyer justified in sticking at technical trifles when the fortunes of a great family and its utter ruin trembled in the balance. Technical trifles! He could not dismiss the falsification of a special licence as a technical trifle. No amount of proverbial philosophy could assuage his professional uneasiness. And the

visit, in the course of this very first day, of the new Lady Wroth, unveiled this time, and as loud-voiced and blatant in her demand for an instalment of her alimony, as she had seemed mysterious, dignified, and low of speech on the previous morning, did not tend to confirm the security of his feelings, as regards the completeness of Lord Wroth's advantages in this great transaction.

"That woman will give us trouble yet," said he to himself, breathing heavily through his teeth, as the door closed on the flouncing blue velvet mantle. "Yes. There is no doubt that woman could make things remarkably unpleasant, did she know how. And so astute a person, so consummate an actress——"

He shook his head. How he had been taken in, even he! Yesterday he had actually felt—no, he would not say, attracted exactly, but impressed—yes, impressed. And to-day her impudent good looks had struck him with a new and unutterly distasteful notion. The creature was of the kind he feared, the kind which might very well end by appealing to the taste of such a profligate as his young client. Here was a contingency he had not sufficiently foreseen. But, in truth, he had had no time to foresee anything during the recent whirlwind.

What of the regeneration of the family? What of the likely duration of the great fortune? A new, gayer, more notorious dance to ruin for the race of Wroth, that was all. He heaved a sigh in the direction of the irreproachable, docile Mary Campbell.

It was in the midst of such meditations that he received the message:

"Expect me to-night at your house.—Wroth."

Mr. Minchin turned the sheet over and over in his

grey fingers. Impossible to surmise what this might portend. Any freak was to be feared from such a brain. He noted the despatch was from Dover. It would seem as if the bridegroom had the thought of flying the country that held his wife; a very wise proceeding in Mr. Minchin's opinion. But why the return?

He struck the paper irritably in his perturbation. One thing was clear—my lord meant to spend his wealth recklessly. Twenty pounds or so thrown away for this unnecessary haste.

The lawyer sat musing unpleasantly after his six o'clock dinner. There was no flavour in the glass of brown sherry before him. He even thought Mary Campbell's cooking had lacked its usual perfection. He felt sure the creature had wept into that fricassee of lamb. There had been a want of crispness about her fried-fish balls, and, in his brief interview to-day, he had marked that her nose-tip was unwontedly rosy. He remembered with discomfort how she had sniffed as he gave her his morning orders.

When Lord Wroth was announced by the little black-garbed body servant, who looked as if he was made of some old deed himself, so faded and dry-as-dust was he, the attorney rose from his seat, with marked disapproval and anxiety.

Pallid, unshaven, mud-stained, in the same riding garments he had chosen for the wedding, Wroth's appearance confirmed the lawyer's most uncomfortable suspicions. But after a few words had been exchanged, after the young man, declining refreshment, had taken seat and begun quietly to explain the purpose of his visit, Mr. Minchin almost started to stare at him, passed a hand over his eyes and stared again, as if to make quite sure he was not dreaming. He had seen

Wroth in many lights before; in gay humour—not often; in desperate, reckless moods frequently; had seen him now mocking, now fierce, now bitingly sardonic; but never, as to-night, quiet, clear-brained, dignified, positively business-like. It might have been a new man, successor to the great inheritance and to the entanglements of a dead Wroth, and determined to do justice to both.

"I am going abroad, Minchin—possibly for a long period," Wroth began, as he took a seat opposite his man of law. "And, by the way, this reminds me; you will please send a note at once to my lodgings for my landlord there. There is not much time for my preparations—he must have it to-night." So saying, he reached for paper and pen on a side table and scribbled a few lines which he folded and directed.

"Yes, I am going abroad," he resumed, when Mr. Minchin, ringing for the famulus, had sent the man on the errand. "I find it necessary to start to-morrow. I shall require a large sum of money, both in hand and abroad. During my absence it is my wish that you should examine and put in the way of settlement every just claim against me. I shall keep you constantly acquainted with my address, that you may consult me upon any point that may appear necessary. You have already given me details, I believe, of the extent of my new fortune. But I have not carried the figures in my head, I am only aware vaguely of its magnitude. I should like to go into the matter fully with you to-night, in view of certain expenditures which it is my intention to make in connection with the estate."

Mr. Minchin's glance was fixed on the handsome face. Astonishment began to give way to an increasing

sense of self-satisfaction; a glow crept to his cheeks. Here, then, was the reward for his daring; the acknowledgment of his subtle strategy; the guerdon of all his troubles and bitter anxieties. But for his daring stroke, his stroke of genius, this transformation would never have taken place; this rational young nobleman would now be an exile from his dismantled home, only escaping the debtors' prison by the privilege of the rank he had disgraced. The downward course once started, the ultimate destruction would have come with dizzy swiftness.

The attorney slowly addressed himself to his neglected glass, and rediscovered the admirable nuttiness of his sherry. He rubbed his hands. His sharp smile took a positive tenderness as Wroth proceeded in the same deliberate, masterful tones:

"I understood you to say there was a large balance of accumulated interest available. No doubt these sums have been invested, but I should propose to draw upon that fund for the settlement of debts and my immediate expenses."

"Quite so, my lord. There is something like a hundred thousand—four years' accumulations—which, with the income of the investments——"

Wroth raised his hand. "One moment, Mr. Minchin, before going into that. I will, if you please, conclude the statement of my plans."

Mr. Minchin stared again; then a chuckle escaped him:

"Upon my word," he thought, "he's got a strain of the City grandfather in him, after all. And 'tis I shall have discovered it. Yes, I am all attention, my lord," he said.

As Wroth proceeded, the grey head nodded approvingly from time to time. Quite so. He was

unreservedly of his lordship's opinion. All moneys expended, within reason, on the estate, must be regarded as a reinvestment. The place was a waste, as his lordship said. The park and woods must be replanted. Quite so. And the house—in a sad state of dilapidation, Mr. Minchin had lamented it on more than one occasion—put in thorough repair. That was imperative. Certainly Mr. Bertram might be trusted, with sufficient help, to remain in charge at the Abbey during the carrying out of the work.

It was only when the young man's voice, a little husky with fatigue, but unfalteringly clear and precise, went on to give orders anent the church and its restoration, that the lawyer's face became overshadowed again.

Here was the first sign of returning folly. Restore the church!

"Surely, my lord . . . your lordship has made such admirable resolutions, showed so much sense, and if I may so phrase it, so much business capacity, up to this, that I venture to lay before you the disadvantage of an unnecessary expense of this kind, when so great demands are being made upon your funds. Ruins are very picturesque in a park. Restoration of the church! Is your lordship aware of the magnitude of the undertaking?"

Wroth raised his eyes from the contemplation of his ringless hands. He drew his brows swiftly together:

"Won't the fortune stand it?"

"Oh, certainly, my lord—certainly the fortune will stand it. But I should fail in my duty did I not point out——"

"Your duty to-night, Mr. Minchin, is to note my instructions."

Their glances met. Again the unwonted red

flickered on the attorney's cheekbones. He did not quite know what to make of this unknown spirit that seemed to have taken possession of Lord Wroth's handsome young body. The old extravagance was breaking forth, yet with a difference.

"And see," went on Wroth, "that the best man in England has charge of it—and, mark you, not a stone but in its old place, not a crocket or a leaf from the fellow's own fancy. Is this quite clear? It shall stand, I tell you, in its ancient glory."

Mr. Minchin, this time surreptitiously, turned a curious look upon the speaker. Wroth's eyes were wide. He seemed to be fixing some distant vision of beauty. His lips were parted upon a faint smile. The lawyer came as near an internal oath as his correct attitude of mind had ever approached.

"Confound the young man . . . looks like a poet now!"

The far-away eyes came back to reality with swiftness. Mr. Minchin shifted uneasily from the sharp, questioning glance that fell upon him. Coughing behind his hand:

"Quite so, my lord," he affirmed. "Sir John Soane is no doubt the proper man for the purpose—or Mr. Wilkins, perhaps. And as your lordship said, all restoration to the property may, after all, be regarded as an investment to the profit of your lordship's descendants."

No sooner had the words left his lips than he realised their enormity.

The blood welled to Wroth's face in an angry wave. The heavy lids fell over his eyes, the wings of his nostrils dilated upon his quick breathing. The attorney coughed again; made a pretence of drawing forth his note-book and entering the heads of his instructions.

But the silence pressed even upon his unsensitive imagination with a horrible intensity. Mr. Minchin, however, as he had already proved, was a man of good courage. The very essence of his vocation in life, as he was fond of saying himself, was the grasping of the nettle. He closed the book with a snap, and, looking up, remarked in his quietest business voice:

"Lady Wroth called on me this very morning, my lord, and I handed her the first instalment of her allowance."

The blood ebbed so quickly from the young man's face, that again, for an instant, his companion had a sense of alarm.

"A glass of wine, my lord," he cried, reaching out for the decanter.

But Wroth motioned the attention from him with impatient hand. Some curious pride of profession jubilated within the lawyer's soul.

"I'll make a man of him—I'll make a man of him yet!" he said to himself. "Your lordship," he pursued, "would have done better with Mary Campbell. I may tell you that the lady of your choice was scarcely satisfied with the generous, very generous provision for her. And in other ways, besides economy——" He broke off; Wroth had clapped a hand upon his wrist.

"Minchin," he whispered, "that knot you've tied so carefully and so tight about my neck . . ." the cold fingers relinquished their touch, and Wroth was now pulling at his stock with much the same gesture he had used in the churchyard after the marriage ceremony. "That knot you tied," he went on; "can it never be undone, man—never?"

Mr. Minchin stared; for once his excellent

composure failed him. The answer leaped from his mouth before he had time for reflection:

"The marriage could be annulled—annulled, my lord—and a pretty kettle of fish that would be . . . for us all, my lord. And your lordship a pauper again. Good God!" he exclaimed, as the idea struck more piercingly home, "you are surely not thinking of any steps in that direction, Lord Wroth! It would be my ruin as well as yours."

His lips trembled. Truly, truly, the righteous man is punished swiftly who steps one line from the straight path!

Wroth drew back. The sudden light faded from his face; the gleam from his eye. He gave a short laugh—the laugh of past reckless hours.

"Hullo, Minchin, is it as bad as all that? Steeped in crime, and all for me, are you? No, never fear, I'll not go back on you. And pauper, you say? I can't afford it, and that's the ugly truth. Gad, no, I can't afford, now, to be a pauper!" He fell silent on the thought; his mind worked. "It's devilish! A pauper and she so rich. A pauper? Worse than pauper, bound by debt, ruined, a disgraced man. . . . And she, rich, to go to her with a sordid scandal, the mud of the courts, reeking with the notorieties of a fraudulent, ignoble marriage! Impossible! . . . So it's tied for life, is it?" he cried again aloud, with still his laugh of self-mockery. "No way out of it, eh? Not even with your legal twists and wriggles?"

Mr. Minchin passed a hand across his damp brow.

"There is divorce, of course. Divorce would not invalidate the provisions of the will as the annulment undoubtedly would. Only . . . ." he paused

again. Decidedly the whole business was proving too much for him; he was speaking to-night like the greenest of articled clerks.

"Only what, man? Out with it!"

"Divorce can only take place in cases where the contracting parties have actually lived together. Now you and Lady Wroth——"

He broke off again, for Wroth turned upon him with a murderous look. The young man rose abruptly from his seat, and walked over to the window, flinging the curtain aside to gaze out into the night. An unseen moon silvered the edge of the roofs and tower of St. Helen's. An oil lamp flickered, orange and yellow, at each corner of the little court, and against one of them the budding branches of a lilac tree nodded and beckoned. A few window squares shone warm out of the opposite houses—for the rest, all was dark and silent.

"I was about to remark, my lord," proceeded Mr. Minchin desperately, "that Lady Wroth or yourself——"

For the third time he was interrupted. Wroth wheeled round, with all the old fierce passion in his mien, with something added, a deeper, angrier note, as of fuller manhood, and more bitter understanding.

"Never mention that name to me again," he thundered.

And then he came back slowly to the table, sat down and dropped his head upon his hands.

"My God," he said in a kind of cry: "We have made a success of this business, have not we, Minchin, a complete success?"

Hard into the night the two men sat together.

But never a word passed between them, from that moment forward, but dealt with the severest detail of accounts, powers, and authorities.

And about that time, Sebastien Picard, the French valet, overjoyed at the thought of returning to his native land, after so many years, was eagerly applying his *valet de bonne maison* cleverness to all the preparations for a long tour abroad.

CHAPTER XVIII

MON-REPOS raises its little gray and pink stone façade on the western skirt of the forest of Compiègne, between the deep woods and the wide champaign of Artois. Dignified according to French custom by the title of château, it is in fact merely a coquettish *maison de campagne,* built in Louis XV. days—the days of Watteau, of scented and elegant rustic life, of artificial simplicity—by a high-living member of the once great feudal family of La Roche-Amand. This nobleman desired a discreet retreat, *suffisamment sylvestre,* according to the taste of the age, yet not out of reach of his *service du Roy;* and for two generations it had sheltered, no doubt, very charming existences.

After the tidal wave of the Terror had swept over France, Mon-Repos alone was left to the last of that race, of all his wide possessions.

Spiridion Hyacinthe Amédée, Comte de la Roche-Amand, had been left early *chef de famille,* and had known years of wealth, power, and happiness before the cataclysm. Flung then into one prison, transferred to another, he had, by some freak of fate, ultimately been forgotten in the count of the guillotine, while the nearest and furthest of his kin atoned to France for blood, rank, and refinement. He had been two years a prisoner when the ninth of Thermidor broke open the

locks and he emerged to find himself a ruined and desolate man. His wife, frail flower of youth, his young brothers, his relations, his very servants, all were gone! The ancestral estates in Anjou were sacked and burned; his Paris hotel in the Marais confiscated to national uses. Only by the fidelity of the farmer couple who, during the long years of stress, had charge of Mon-Repos amid the woods, was he on the Restoration enabled to reassert his title to this small fraction of his property. In the intermediate period he became one of that band of *émigrés* as familiar to London as to Coblenz, to Geneva as to Turin.

At the latter place the Comte de la Roche-Amand—under the name of M. Spiridion, save the noblesse!—earned the meagre bread that sufficed to keep a sad soul in a lean body. He had always had a pretty taste for music: this, with the memory of airs and graces, of courtly salutes and delicate finger-touches, stood alone between him and beggary. And at Turin it was that little Juliana Tempest, the nine-year-old daughter of the English Ambassador to the Court of Savoy, became his pupil.

From the first an extraordinary sympathy drew him to the child. It was perhaps because of some resemblance he chose to find in her deep eyes to those that had been the brief, pure joy of his life; perhaps, again, because of the paternal instinct that grows but the stronger in most men when all youth is past, for he loved all children in his gentle, tired way. "*La délicieuse petite*," he was thinking, when on their first forgathering she suddenly looked up and their eyes met. He started; that deep, grave, unchild-like, rather mournful gaze, so strangely purple under the black hair, reminded him—The pain in his

soul, lulled, hidden away, silenced, awoke and cried out.

Something moved her to cross the floor and lay her hand on his clenched fingers. From that moment the father in him lived for her. As for the child Juliana, when questioned and teased for her infatuation for M. Spiridion, she could only find one answer:

"He looks so sad."

But, unknown to herself, there was another reason: her secretively passionate nature already yearned for an absorbing affection. Her mother was dead, her father engrossed in the arduous diplomatic work of those vexed days—a dry, silent man, who hardly thought of his daughter except as an additional burden in life. By-and-by the dancing master began to give lessons in French, then also in music to the little lady of the embassy, for Sir Julian Tempest was delighted to find a person of confidence to whom he could depute some of his responsibilities.

The *émigré* and his pupil became, by private consent, "*mon parrain*," "*ma filleule*"—the oddest companions at their distant ends of life; withal, the most delicately matched. They owed to each other more than either perhaps realised. Besides the mere intellectual instruction (and Spiridion had been a trifle bitten by the philosophical movement of his early manhood, and had more sedulous knowledge than most of his own class) Juliana learned precious lessons from a character that overwhelming calamity had not embittered. As for him, what she brought into his desolate heart was as fragrant as incense.

When the rush of Bonaparte's arms drove the Count of Savoy, and with it the ambassador, to the

island security of Sardinia, bitter was the parting between Spiridion and Juliana. They vowed like lovers not to forget; and for once such a promise was kept. In course of time the fate of diplomacy took Sir Julian to Florence, and there Juliana married. Monsieur Spiridion gave himself leave of absence from his laboriously collected connection, hurried to the City of Flowers to see for himself how they were disposing of his child. Oh, this was not the marriage he had dreamed for her. . . . A man as old as himself. Monstrous! He made one futile attempt at remonstrance with the ambassador, was very properly put back in his place, and returned to his drudgery with an aching heart. In their two years' separation the child had grown into a beautiful woman. What were they doing with her youth, her splendour, and her hidden heart of gold? To give her to Mordante dei Vespi, the old Florentine *roué*—Mordante of the wasp sting!

For the first time he thought of that pale vision with the violet eyes, that so faintly resembled Juliana's magnificent reality, with a feeling akin to peace: there might be worse fates than the quick passage of the guillotine for a man's most beloved!

Yet when a year later Juliana insisted on his spending a summer week with them in the castle up in the hills, he could not but admit to himself that the monstrous marriage seemed to have turned out extraordinarily well. Juliana seemed content; Count Mordante was apparently a courteous, kindly husband whose constant memory of his own years, of his wife's, gave to the married intercourse a dignity that was not without some romance of its own. And she had grown curiously womanly for her years; serene brow bore token to serene soul. But the old *émigré*, with the

perspicacity of love, read in her veiled eyes the slumbering dream.

"*Pour Dieu!* that she may not awaken!" he prayed to himself.

It was partly owing to the *parrain's* earnest advice that the *filleule* kept herself so apart from the world.

"Listen, my daughter," he had said to her; "a young wife to an old man will have scandal about her in this society if she so much as take a cup of chocolate from the fingers of a young man."

Juliana's own mood was for solitude; so it was easy for her to be docile to such counsel.

With the Restoration of the French royal line, the *émigré* returned to France to resume his name and to enter into such remnant of property as he could still establish his title to. Modest enough it was; but the Comte de la Roche-Amand's wants had grown modest too; everything now was luxury to the dancing master: his own house, his own gardens, above all, his own country. There is no nation in the world whose exiles suffer from such yearning for the homeland as the French; *le mal du pays* consumes every poor banished son of that fair country.

Yet Spiridion left in Italy, in spite of his joy of return, a deep regret: Juliana, his little Juliana, never more than child-high to his heart. She wrote, it is true, long detailed letters, at regular intervals, for a whole year. Then came the rejoicing news of her journey to England and her promise of a halt at Petit-Repos on her way back to Florence. And after that followed a great disappointment to the old man, a great trouble, a mystery. At the very acme of his expectation she sent tidings that she was detained in England by the illness of foster-sister Peggie,

Spiridion knew all about Peggie, as indeed up to then he had known even to the innermost folds of the web of Juliana's life. But here came the first break in the intimacy. After a prolonged silence a letter reached him from Florence, full of excuses: she had had to bring the invalid straight to their destination. The Count would spare her no longer. She loved her *parrain* always as dearly; she gave him a full description of Peggie's health, of their journey—and she told him nothing. It was as if a door had been shut between them.

"Something is most certainly happening," said Comte Spiridion in the dim salon of Mon-Repos, as, propping his chin upon one hand, he stared at the crossed sheets. He guessed too well what the something was—the only thing that could have produced this reticence. Even to a mother, the daughter keeps secret the tale of first love.

A vision of Juliana's face suddenly rose before him: her face as he had seen it upon their last farewell; its lovely pallor, framed by the dark masses of hair; her sweet deep eyes welling with slow tears for his departure; her lips faintly trembling. But now, into those eyes had come, he thought, the knowledge they had missed hitherto. Juliana and love. . . . And the old man, the wasp, between Juliana and love!

Comte Spiridion's heart became filled with devouring anxiety. Had he listened to its prompting, he would have packed and started that instant for Italy. But he had a wise brain, as well as a tender heart; and, above all, an exquisite sense of reserve. He had to the strongest degree what he would himself have described as *la pudeur de l'affection*. No—there was no cry for him, in this letter. On the contrary, it was the closed door.

God forbid that he should intrude his old love and his old wisdom. When she wanted him, she would find him. For the rest, a little paternal advice upon the minor question of this Peggie was all he could permit himself.

"Mistrust that little one, *ma fille*," he wrote in his thin, flowing hand. "She will give you trouble yet."

To the moment of her husband's death, Juliana sent the usual fortnightly letter. Yet that locked door was not set open, not by the smallest fraction. And after the event which made her a widow, the Count felt as if bars and padlocks were now added to the barriers that divided them. He had wanted to hasten to her at this crisis, more than he had ever wanted anything, perhaps, since his great tragedy. But again refinement kept him from offering more than a hint of willingness. It was only when, at the beginning of this last March, Juliana had fallen into complete silence, that, haunted by an increasing sense of her need of him, he wrote frankly from his heart:

"Do you not want me, my child? For a whole year I have felt that you needed the old *parrain*. Well, again, you know where to find him. Or he can come and find you? He is not yet so old, little Juliana, but that he could not make very good haste to your side."

It was four weeks since that letter had gone; and there was silence still.

Madame Thomas, the excellent *gouvernante* at Mon-Repos, and Prosper, Monsieur le Comte's rustic but most devoted body-servant, both observed with desolation that their master was growing thinner.

"And there was not too much of him, to begin with," cried Madame Thomas. Prosper had just imparted

to her the appalling tidings that M. le Comte now gave more than half his meal to Biribi, the greedy spaniel.

"I misdoubted something," said Prosper. "Biribi, who is becoming every day more like a barrel, and Monsieur le Comte more like a skeleton. So I looked through the door chink."

"Monsieur le Comte would not wound my feelings by leaving my dishes, monsieur, who knows I have my pride in his little dinners! Ah, *mon Dieu*, and he does not even care for his violin any more!" Madame Thomas wiped her eyes with her apron as she spoke.

The end of April it was. The lilac was all bursting into brown buds around Petit-Repos. The beeches of the park were dreamlike in delicate green. Cowslips enamelled the new grass. The birds were having a very orgy of song in treetops and underwood. Except for the vivid, jewel green of young leaf and blade, the flaming of tulip and jonquil, the spring world was drawn in faint tints. A misty blue haze hung over woods and the meadows; the sky was pale azure; pale amethyst were the lines of low hills in the western distance; and to the north, the east, and the south, the great forest was blurred in dim and melting hues, greys and mauves, russet of old wood, olive of young buds.

The intoxicating scent of spring was in the air; mingled with the pungent fragrance of wood smoke. La Roche-Amand inhaled it with that rush of memory which scent, more than any other bodily appeal, brings to the mind, but he could look back on that far past, now, more with tenderness than pain. As far as his own life was concerned, the serenity of evening had fallen upon him.

Yet there was a cloud on the horizon. As he stood upon his terrace and looked out into the divine April afternoon, the thought of Juliana obsessed him with more than usual pertinacity. What was she doing, that poor child? Why was she dumb? It could not be illness, for that would not have been kept a secret. No, he felt the certitude that the trouble was of the soul.

But it is the blessing of the old that they become as children, soothed by little interesting events of the hour. Yonder was a blackbird, making trills and roulades, sweeter than are ever heard from human throat. Positively there was quite a definite phrase of melody in those liquid notes. It reminded him of a romance which he heard in the Florence days, and he was moved to try if he could recall the inspiration.

And now Madame Thomas, in the kitchen, rejoiced as the violin strains again welled into the house.

"Eh, eh, that goes better," she said, nodding over her copper pan. "It comes pat. Just as my little *carré de veau* is turning such a beautiful gold! Monsieur le Comte shall not give it to Biribi to-day. He plays; he will have appetite!"

With a last fond look at the masterpiece, the excellent woman slipped on her clogs and pattered into the potager to select her *petit bouquet*—chives, chervil, parsley, and tarragon—for the green salad that was to escort her roast.

Great was her astonishment, as she was passing the kitchen-garden gate, to behold, coming swiftly across the meadow path towards the terrace, a strange lady, some one Madame Thomas had never seen before. None of the Count's neighbours was the least like this tall, beautiful woman, with her pale face, her long black robes, who walked like a princess, yet moved

with an air of eagerness, as if she was coming home. Her hat hung on her arm and the wind played through the ripples of her hair.

The stranger stopped at the gate and looked at Madame Thomas with pleasant eyes, a smile on her lips.

"Is the Comte de la Roche-Amand at home?" she asked.

Madame Thomas rolled her arms under her blue apron and curtseyed.

"*Eh, ma belle dame*——" she began.

But the visitor lifted her gloved hand:

"Nay, I hear, I hear," she interrupted. "That is his violin." She stood a while listening; the bird song and the voice of the violin intermingled very quaintly, all in the perfumed air. "Don't announce me," she said, her fingers on the latch of the gate, "I have come to visit the Count. My chaise is waiting on the road. I want just to walk in on him, straight."

"But does M. le Comte expect——?"

"He always expects me," said the stranger, enigmatically.

Madame Thomas gave up trying to work out her astonishment. She trotted in front of the visitor—just as she was, in her cooking apron and sabots. Never was such an adventure! She clumped into the house and opened the door of the great saloon were M. le Comte was performing a wonderful run upon the strings.

"*Une belle dame pour M. le Comte!*" she cried importantly, and flung the door wide. She drew back, but no further than the threshold; according to her creed of devoted familiar service, she was at least entitled to view the meeting.

La Roche-Amand glanced up from his fiddle, with

his bow poised in the middle of a sweep; then he flung the instrument on the couch and came forward, arms extended.

("It must have been as the lady said, that he expected her somehow," Madame Thomas afterwards informed Prosper. "For, my faith, M. le Comte did not look surprised, only his eyes shone: you should have seen them shine! And his face, white as my linen, but shining too!")

The old man took his visitor by both hands. Every sound he had drawn in music had been a thought of her: it seemed as if he had evoked her. Neither spoke for a while; then taking her head delicately between his fingers, he kissed her forehead.

"My child, my very dear child . . ."

And here Madame Thomas stepped out of her sabots and, holding them in one hand, padded briskly back to her own domain. By the mercy of the good God, she had a chicken in the larder. There should be a *fricassée* to the square of veal. Prosper was in his pantry. Shrilly she called:

"Despatch, you great good-for-nothing! There's a daughter come to visit M. le Comte, and she's a princess if ever there was one."

After the kiss of greeting, Comte Spiridion continued to hold Juliana's head with tender hands, while he gazed down into her beloved face. Characteristically, silence was still upon her as the purple eyes looked back into his; and slowly a great tear rose and brimmed down each cheek.

It was the face he had seen in his troubled vision. And lo! in her eyes was what he had feared to find. Love had come to her and with it not happiness.

She disengaged herself quietly, and brushed the moisture from her lashes.

"Behold, *parrain*, I am here, at last. It is so good to see you, and that is why I cry."

Then Comte Spiridion knew that though she had come to him, the door was not yet to be opened between them.

CHAPTER XIX

To pass within the high park walls of Mon-Repos was to enter into a bygone century.

The fragrance of a lost courtesy, of an outworn elegance, was in the very air. Some thirty years of savage disruption, of rapine and massacre, of warfare and barbaric conquest, of gross splendour and tragic defeat, had changed royal France; changed from the hearts and faces of her children to the very physiognomy of the land itself. Only in a few outlying, forgotten corners, such as this, lurked the ghosts of ancient days. Two score miles to the south, Paris might still be officially rejoicing in the Restoration of her sovereign; but it was only the semblance of Royalty—a thousand throats might raise the cry of "*Vive le Roy*": but royalty was dead in France, and the spirit that had killed it was living.

At Mon-Repos the scent of the lilies lingered. In spite of the small means of its master, although a mere peasant lad united in his person all the charges that the Mon-Repos of bygone days imperatively required for its service—major-domo, confidential valet, *chasseur* and *laquais d'antichambre*, not to speak of gardener and stableman—the spirit of the grand seigneur, the high tone of the days of old remained supreme and would remain, while a La Roche-Amand ruled. The incommunicable supremacy of his birth clung to the

pair de France who had been dancing master, as becomingly as did his old-world garments.

"How very splendid you are, *mon parrain!*" said Juliana on their first meeting, the morning after her arrival.

It was in the garden. She had halted in her meditative walk between the rows of jonquils to smile at him as he hurried towards her. Her eyes ran with a tender amusement from the wonderful lace of his ruffle to the sheen of the pearl brocade waistcoat, repeated in the stockings that clung to the fine lean legs. "In a silk coat, too, and at this hour! My dear godfather, is this Trianon, and are we expecting her Majesty?"

"It is to do you honour, Juliana. I do not expect any other queen."

"Alas!" she said, "that all this black of mine should bring such a blot to the picture!"

La Roche-Amand peered searchingly under the shadow of her hat. Then he touched the black scarf floating on her shoulders with an almost timid finger:

"You were alone, my poor child?"

She turned her eyes upon him; and for the first time in all his acquaintance with her, he saw them look hard.

"Once, when I was a little girl, I spoke, in your hearing, evil of one who was dead. And you said to me: 'Death claims at least the charity of silence.' Those were good words, godfather."

The kind grey eyes, so astonishingly bright still under the white brows and the powdered hair, became clouded with doubt in which there was also something of pain. This adopted child of his loneliness, how she had grown away from him, how she had put him out of her life! Was he to know nothing, then? This

pang of lost intimacy, which nearly every parent in the flesh is bound to experience, was not to be spared to his spiritual paternity. All the harder for his delicate soul to bear that the love he lavished had no rights to claim.

Here was new trouble he had not suspected. Whatever the experience might have been that had come into Juliana's life, it had evidently brought with it wide-reaching results. She whom he had left, honouring and honoured, more completely than a union of such disparity would have seemed to warrant, had now upon the first allusion to the dead, an accent of bitterness, a steely flash of glance. There came a heavy pause between them. Then Juliana laid a hand upon his breast:

"Be patient with me, godfather. Oh, dear godfather; I came to you to tell you everything, to ask your help—— and now that I am with you, I cannot speak! I have not found myself yet."

She drew nearer; and he saw her hand wander to her forehead and then to her breast.

"There is fever, here and here," she said, rather wildly. "In a few days, amid this peace, with you, it will be different. Dear father—the only real father I have ever known—let me rest. It is so beautiful in this place, with the flowers and with you."

The old man trembled as he held her to him, silently. Words seemed too gross to his subtle perception. With a sudden nervous gesture, startlingly unlike the suave repose he had always known in her, she flung her hat from her head, that she might lay her face against his shoulder, like a child. The waves of her wonderful hair, disordered, invited his mute caress. Again a little while they stood dumb. Then, with another mood, she drew herself from him. He

had thought she had been weeping; but the purple of her eyes was undimmed.

"Oh, the good, peaceful life we are going to have here, we two!" she cried. "Do you know, *parrain*, since you have made yourself so handsome I am going to make myself lovely, just for you! This black—fie! with the Easter coming! This mourning—oh, what a mockery! Wait for me—I shall be back very quickly." She took two running steps and halted, looked back at him over her shoulder: "If you were to amuse yourself by gathering a bouquet—eh, what say you?—to complete a *toilette de printemps!*"

She blew a kiss and vanished round the bend of the box-wood hedge.

Comte Spiridion remained standing with eyes fixed on the spot where he had seen the last flutter of the black scarf. Then he sighed and then he smiled.

"Positively coquettish! *Allons! C'est bien l'amour qui lui tient au cœur!* . . . Love itself, the capricious boy! And she so grave, so sedate, even as a child. Who is the man? Where? Her soul used to be like a mountain lake, sheltered from all winds. . . . *Hé! hé!* but love comes sooner or later, and with him the storm, the troubled waters. *Pauvre petite!* She is going to make herself lovely—for the old godfather, of course!" And down somewhere in a hidden recess of his wise, patient, tender heart there pricked a small subtle thorn of jealousy.

Rousing himself at last, he turned his thoughts to her behest. Jonquils? No, too garish. The flowering wistaria? Exquisite in colour, but over-heavy a blossom. . . . Stay, only last Sunday morning he had noticed how the primroses starred the copse of aspens near the entrance gate. Primroses! Their scent as sweetly faint as their colour. Against the fine ivory of her skin, their tints would delicately

harmonise. Primroses, with their message of hope. . . . That was the posy for Juliana!

There was a light, capricious wind and the sun shone in benign glory between high racing white clouds that never threatened rain, but only cast charming quick shadows on the green of the young meadow. Down in the copse was a dancing fretwork of light and shade. The leafage was far enough advanced to make the trees all sap-green, yet not so far but that every outline of bough and twig remained defined. The aspens quivered, now white, now shadowed; and as the breeze flustered them, gave out their sound of faint, tremulous laughter. The grass grew sparsely under the trees; but there rose a whole spring generation of fern, the fronds still curled like fairy croziers in their unpaintable hue of beryl; and around every bole, in every fold of ground, the primrose faces peering amid their large crinkled foliage. There was a hint of wild hyacinth about the glade; but the primrose ruled—the copse was full of their subtle breath.

The old man stood a moment or two at the entrance of the wood, bathing his soul in the scene; stirred out of its usual placidity, it was invaded by a spreading sense of the beauty and pathos of the spring. Perhaps because he was so utterly apart from it, because life had killed the youth in him more completely than in most men, he seemed to find himself the more able to take in and to understand. Leaping bough, blossom, soaring song, savours of rising sap, heady scents upon the wind, all the life and strife, young vigour and yearning, all these things had no call for his blood; there was nothing in his old frame to respond, but his spirit was moved to immense sympathy.

O Primavera . . . gioventù dell' anno
O Gioventù . . . primavera della vita!

He grew warm in his heart at the thought of the young life now finding shelter yonder under the eaves of his whilom empty house; and he had a sudden, ineffably pleasing vision of little ones running about those empty passages, blooming in those dim spaces; children whose voices should call him *bon papa*. He could not believe it possible that such a woman as Juliana would love unworthily; and he knew it impossible that anyone who had loved her could ever give her up. Therefore—*sursum corda!* After all, the spring had its promise for the old man.

He was smiling as he began to gather the primroses for her bosom. The task was not without some difficulty, for he was a trifle stiff in the joints, and primroses must be stooped for. And then he was very careful in his choice, as serious and important over his task as any child.

There was a fair-sized bunch of the innocent placid-faced things in his hand when he paused.

"And to think it should be the old godfather, who gives her the gage of love, on this morning made for love," he mused. Who was the man? He must break down this reserve between them, or how could he help her? Yes, delicately, with precautions infinite, he would induce her heart to open to him.

On the spur of the impulse he turned his steps back again towards the avenue, but suddenly halted in astonishment. Leaning over the iron railings that fenced the wood from the meadowland stood a young man, watching him. After a moment, Comte Spiridion advanced at a quickened pace.

Not till he had come to within a few steps of the stranger did the latter move; then he straightened himself and swept the beaver from his head. The full sunshine blazed on close crisp hair of an unwontedly

vivid chestnut hue; on a young face of almost classical chiselling; on a straight, well-knit figure that seemed instinct with a splendid alertness.

"My faith, 'tis a young god a-wander in my woods. . . . Apollo himself! But, by Olympus, what seeks he here?" thought La Roche-Amand in his amazement. He laid the primrose bunch against his heart with a sweep, as if it had been the *chapeau-bras* of his Versailles days, and bowed.

"Monsieur?" he began, drawing closer. Then the whimsical fancy took shape on his lips. (Old as one may be, a spring morning is apt to go to the head!) "And what may young Apollo be seeking in my park?" he inquired.

The delicate faded face was wrinkled with gentle humour. But the god-like youth was smiling no longer. At the last words a fire had leaped to the brown eyes he opened wide upon the questioner. In the most grave voice he answered:

"He is looking for Daphne—Daphne, who has fled from him."

Spiridion, the primroses still clapped to his heart, contemplated him a moment in silence. Conflicting thoughts were busy in his mind. Here then was the romance he had but even now dreamed of. Romance very handsomely materialised in faith! *Un gentilhomme*, or he was no judge; *et un homme d'esprit!*

"Daphne . . . ! Be reassured, O Apollo! There is yet no laurel in these woods," he pursued after a pause.

"I hope not," answered the extraordinary young man with the same seriousness. "I have made swift chase!"

"Mythology aside, my dear sir," said Spiridion, "may I request to know what has gained me the honour of your visit?"

"M. le Comte—for I take it you are the Comte de la Roche-Amand," said the intruder—he spoke a very clear French, but with an accent unmistakably English in its clipping purity of enunciation, "mythology has already expressed very well the purpose of my visit. I am seeking a lady who, I am given to understand, is at present under your roof. I have the most earnest reasons——"

"Apollo's reason?" interrupted Spiridion, with a twinkle in his eye.

The other made a sudden gesture.

"Sir," he said, "I find you gathering flowers. You greet me with an allusion to classic poetry. You have been, sometime in life, I conjecture, on Apollo's business yourself—but——" His eyes flamed at a new turn of thought: "Daphne . . . *absit omen!*" he cried. "I'll have no more of Apollo's story in this business. Sir, I am Lord Wroth. I love the lady who is with you—her fine Italian name comes awkwardly to my tongue: I know her best as Juliana. I appeal to you to allow me speech of her."

La Roche-Amand had not felt so keen an excitement these five and twenty years. A red spot began to burn on either withered cheek. It was as if the fire consuming the young man had found its reflection in the old one. After all, it is the best that is left to age, to warm its heart at the fires of youth!—So, it was as he had surmised: had not Juliana come to him from England? And this year of her life-book—closed and sealed against him—had begun, he knew, with a visit to England. Ha! but that had been during her husband's lifetime. His pulses beat a little quicker: in glimmers, he fancied he understood. Plausible theories formed and reformed themselves, chasing each other in his brain.

"Certainly," he answered, with reserve, "the lady whose name is Juliana dwells here, as my guest."

He cast a glance towards the house; and started slightly.

"See, milord, here she comes. If your presence is agreeable to her, I shall be honoured to receive you in my house."

Wroth's eyes followed. And Spiridion, looking back at him, saw the blood ebb from the countenance he had likened to that of a god; saw the full-cut, passionate lips tremble; saw the hand, ungloved, that lay on the rail, tighten till the bones started.

"*Allons, il est amoureux fou,*" thought La Roche-Amand. And there came again the odd bite of jealousy at his heart.

But a few hours had he had his child to himself, and already they were broken in upon by this storm of youth and love and conquest! The next instant a generous reaction overwhelmed all other feelings. It was right that the old father should make way for the young lover. To bring these two together, these two splendid beings: could his last years be granted a more gracious task? He gently touched the tight-clenched hand of Wroth.

"Look," he said, on the impulse of his heart. "She has cast off her mourning. Ah, with what a grace she sways in her lilac silks: such tints have the wisteria blossoms round her windows yonder! *Hé, hé,* milord, how she walks! Does she not mind you of Virgil's fragrant words:

> "'. . . Pedes vestis defluxit ad imos,
> Et vera incessu patuit Dea?'"

There was a strange mixture of bitter and sweet in Juliana's heart as she came forth into the bright

day, clad once more as befitted her own youth and that of the world.

The spring (that had gone even to Comte Spiridion's grey head) had entered into her blood. But in the very potency of its sweetness and the exquisite joy of its promise, the deep-seated misery of her disillusioned love became the more intolerable, and all the youth in her rose in defiance. Why should April be so exquisite, and all not be well with her? Why should the soft spring airs taunt her and suggest such perilous joys when reason, pride, all the innerwoman instincts of dignity forbade them? There came an unknown recklessness over her. She would take from this hour what the spring could give. She found an almost physical pleasure in the challenge of her shimmering silks to mourning and regrets, in the knowledge of her beauty—although no man might ever own it now. The breeze ran to meet her in the garden; the gay life enveloped her. She hastened; she wanted to see the old eyes, at least, rejoice and proclaim her beautiful.

Prosper, very busy at the garden gate, setting shells about a tulip-bed, stared at her.

"O, how magnificent is madame!" cried he, with the sympathetic familiarity of his kind, and blinked as if the vision dazzled. "Yes, madame, M. le Comte is down in the little wood."

He opened the gate for her, clumping in his wooden shoon, and bowed as she sped by.

The sun was in her eyes all the way down the avenue; and she had come bare-headed, for she loved to feel the winds play through her hair. To her the two men, yonder by the fence gate, were but two black figures in the dancing glare. She saw them move and come forward—"Godfather and his *garde-chasse*, or some neighbour," she thought. It was only

when quite close upon them that she halted in her swift undulating walk. Spiridion, keenly watching her face, marked the sudden pallor that swept across it, kindred to that which still lay on the stranger's countenance. He was full of wise saws, garnered in the course of a life the greater part of which had been spent as a mere observer.

"*Amour qui rougit—fleurette! Amour qui pâlit—drame du cœur!*" he said to himself.

"Godfather . . .!"

Upon the cry Juliana put out her hand blindly. And, as the Comte hastened to her, she swayed a little against him. He took the cold fingers in his.

"My dear daughter," he said gravely—"this gentleman will not remain an instant with us, should his presence be distressing to you."

"Shall I go, Juliana?" said Wroth, in a low voice.

The treachery of the spring, of her own youth! She could find no word of dismissal. The blood rushed back from heart to brain. Through the confusion of her thoughts, through the clamour of her pulses, she heard her godfather speaking:

"Milord Wroth," he was saying, ceremoniously, "will you do me the honour of remaining to breakfast with me to-day?" And as he spoke, he pressed Juliana's hand.

Wroth bowed acceptance. He too was silent. Even his lids were cast down over eyes perhaps too eloquent. All three turned and moved slowly towards the house.

When they had reached the porch, Spiridion stood a second or two gravely contemplating Juliana. Upon the ivory pallor of her cheeks now bloomed a flower of perfect carmine; brief, wonderful blossom of the wonderful brief hour of young love. He laid his

primrose posy in her hand with the ceremony which belonged to the occasion.

"Gathered as bidden, my dear one." In his heart he was saying to himself: "To-morrow it will not be of the old man she will ask flowers."

As Juliana fastened the bunch at her breast, she felt the eyes of Wroth upon her. The singularly penetrating yet faint breath of the primroses brought her back with a fierce vividness to that hour of passion and misery, when she had picked up Peggie's nosegay to complete the outward semblance of her deception. She was suddenly back in the bare church of the Wells; back in the graveyard. Nausea, almost faintness, came over her, followed by quick revulsion. The hand she had raised to dash the flowers from her kerchief, pressed them to her throat. She bent to draw their scent into herself. Was she not his wife? And he was close, and it was spring!

CHAPTER XX

MADAME THOMAS tossed an omelette—such a one as she alone could toss. And there was a Navarin of veal —*je ne vous dis que ça!* She twitched about her kitchen with a flame of scarlet on either sallow cheek. She popped the butter into the pan with an imperial hand; here were days, indeed, for Mon-Repos! Already in the last twenty-four hours she had sent up viands which in ordinary times would have lasted M. le Comte's house a week; but she did not regret it, far from that. The credit of the house was in her keeping, she would uphold it to the last egg. Not only a princess—in spite of Mrs. Panton's elaborate explanations in broken French, Madame Thomas clung to her first impression—but an English milord now to provide for! Yet it was worth it. Had Prosper seen M. le Comte this morning? Beautiful as the day he was! *Hein?*

In the long, cool, faded dining-room, however, it was only Comte Spiridion himself who did justice to the housekeeper's excellent dishes. Wroth and Juliana, held in a dreamy spell, could not bring their thoughts to material entities. Scarce were they conscious of surroundings, only of each other. There was a wine that had lain buried in the cellars of Mon-Repos through the death struggle of the last monarchy, through the triumph of the populace, through the glories of the

Empire, maturing in silence and darkness its secret essences. It sang now out of the dingy bottle into the glass: golden, insidious, captivating. Spiridion looked with wise tender eyes at his young guests, and ever and anon silently toasted them. He had kept at heart the guilelessness of a child, in spite of experiences such as come to few men. He thought to know the tale of these lovers—yea, to the last jot. And, after all, he found it a very simple one. They had met in England, while Juliana was not yet free, and even then had loved each other. Of this the wise Spiridion was very sure. Sure, too, that his little Juliana *avait été très sage*, had kept herself very good. As for the other, as for the man—Spiridion's glance rested critically on that fine pale face, instinct even now under its air of marble repose with a fire of passion. He noted the quiver of the high-cut nostril, the line of the full lips. No, milord, he had not been good at all! And faith, Spiridion was not astonished; nay, with that stirring of the old Adam in him which dies not in the most detached until his own death, he would have been disappointed had it been otherwise.

He was positive about it: this Englishman, with the face of a Greek god and the barbaric name, had been the very opposite of virtuous. And when they met again, after Juliana's release, it was the memory of the error of an intemperate passion (which, in her heart, secretly she had shared) that kept the chaste, the high-minded woman from yielding to the happiness that offered itself to her. So La Roche-Amand diagnosed the case. Spread out like a picture before him, he could see it all at a single glance. These dear children, these two beautiful, rare beings, it was his happy lot to bring them together! But how

gradually, how delicately this must be done—he alone who knew the exquisite sensibility of her nature could comprehend.

He turned his look from Wroth to Juliana; doubt still dwelt on her face, a tremulous emotion, that was not all joy. Nothing must be hurried, nothing urged. A woman's soul, a woman's heart, must be captured but never grasped.

So the meal proceeded in a wonderful silence that had no awkwardness in it, nay, was eloquent. Through the open window came the busy calls of the birds, the occasional rumbling and squeaking of the wheelbarrow in the garden as Jeannot, from the farm, fulfilled the duties of Prosper—now all-important butler; or a distant thundergrowl in the kitchen, where Madame Thomas' coffee-mill was being ground with zeal by Lolotte, from the village.

"But, milord, you drink nothing," said Spiridion at last, pointing to the full glasses in front of his guest. ("What the devil," he said to himself, "your true lover never eats, everyone knows that; but, faith, a lover drinks, by authority of every poet since Anacreon and Catullus.")

Wroth started, turned to his host with a bow and a smile that gave to his features, hitherto set in abstracted gravity, an extraordinary youthful charm. He lifted a glass, opened his eyes full on Juliana's face, until the magnetic attraction of his gaze drew hers, then drank. Setting down the empty crystal, he again compelled her eye. She looked, and it seemed to her as if he were drawing her soul from her keeping; as if she were losing herself in that mere yielding of her glance.

She was glad that the tension was broken by the passing in of Madame Thomas' steaming coffee;

that she could rise with the pretext of understanding best how the Count liked his cup—"A great deal of coffee, that it may admit of a great deal of sugar"—as he announced, with a happy laugh.

But, after all, it entailed her preparing some for Wroth also. And though she kept her eyes underward as she handed it to him, she could not prevent their fingers from meeting as he took the cup from her. Again the sense of her own weakness rushed intolerably upon her, more anguish than joy.

"Will you permit me to retire?" she said to her godfather. "This first spring heat sets my head aching."

"Go, my child, go," said the old man, with a little secret laugh. "Milord will understand."

Wroth, in his silence, moved to the door. She paused, almost imperceptibly, as she passed out. He bowed deeply, without attempting either to take her hand or to speak. And it was this omission on his part that, biting at her heart like a serpent, ached in Juliana all the rest of the day.

She ordered the wooden shutters to be closed in her room, banning the blue and green day, and lay, throbbing in all the passion of her glorious youth and strength, torturing herself with vain questions, suppositions, doubts, and self-searchings. Panton crept in and out with whispered suggestions for the alleviation of the pretended headache. Juliana was mute to sullenness. But Mrs. Panton, tiptoeing back to the bare room, where she sat most of her hours, in high British superiority to the "foreign trash" below stairs, had ever and anon a knowing wag of the head.

The young nobleman had come after them, straight. He was the lover after her own heart.

"Yes, my young friend," said La Roche-Amand,

as Wroth took seat again at the round table, "you do well. We must go slowly, very slowly——"

Wroth shot a look at his host. The word "we" was pleasant in his ears; his spirits began to mount. Here was an unexpected ally; this quaint personage who seemed to have stepped out of an already forgotten century, with his formality of language, his deliberate gesture, his airs of ceremony, which in anyone less unmistakably *grand seigneur* might have seemed pomposity. The lover told himself his star was high. Yes, he felt strong enough to go slow, to wait. Juliana's pallor, her silence, her sudden withdrawal after her exquisite moment of yielding at the gate, were to his swift perceptions but the signs of his own power. In spite of his believing himself bound to another, the lawlessness of his passion troubled him not at all. The tide that carried him was so strong, it was so clean, so pure in its very absoluteness, that he could not feel that he was wronging her by it. That marriage of his, freak of fate, was mockery, and in its emptiness could hold no man's honour. Union with Juliana was the foredestined sacred one. What were forms and ceremonies compared to this right of soul to soul?

While these thoughts surged through Wroth's mind, Comte Spiridion continued speaking; with his thin musician's hands emphasising his words by delicate and varied finger gesture:

"The soul of a woman is fitly compared to the butterfly,—to Psyche. Grasp the exquisite, beautiful, fluttering thing with a grasp of rude desire, and behold: what of its bloom, what of the very beauty for which you yearn? O youth, let love be as a rose that its perfume may draw, may enfold, may capture! Do not scare it, young Apollo, and there will still be no laurel in these woods."

He ran from metaphor to metaphor, his eyes smiling on the young man's brooding face.

"All in that physiognomy is noble," thought Spiridion, explaining his own precipitance to himself. "There is genius too, somewhere about that brow. And, O divine goodness, what a glorious thing is youth!"

Suddenly Wroth flung his hand across the table towards his host. The gesture was one of boyish appeal.

"When, sir, and how, shall I come again?"

Spiridion gave a pleased laugh. Had he been the finest diplomatist, Wroth could not have found a surer way to confirm himself in the favour that his gallant air had already won. His tone of deference (so fragrant to age from strong youth), withal his uncontrollable eagerness; his claim for help. The old man would not be excluded, then, from the romance. He was wanted; he was part of it, he, whose ancient heart had still so much love to give! He raised a finger to his forehead in profound thought. There was a deep excitement about this innocent plotting.

"It will not do to be in too great a hurry," he said at last, "but, if towards five o'clock to-morrow evening you were to stroll this way—stay, I have it!" He clapped his head and a cloud of scented powder flew. "You are amateur of music—I know. With that line of brow and eyelid you are certainly fond of music. I have told you I play the violin. You wish to hear it, what more natural? I promise to gratify you. Come at five to-morrow; I will make you some music, and our good curé will likewise come. He thinks he adores music—he takes his little nap while I play. So, that is

arranged. Excellent. Impossible to find anything more delicate."

Comte Spiridion tried to look profoundly sly; but only succeeded in conveying a sense of guileless self-satisfaction. Wroth got up and bowed over the benevolent hand extended to him.

"I am inexpressibly grateful," he said; "indeed, nothing could be more delicate, or more kind."

Spiridion accompanied him to the porch. "You have halted at Compiègne?" he queried.

"At the 'Écu de France,'" answered Wroth.

"Though it is the best in the town, you will be ill-lodged, milord; worse fed," said Spiridion, and ruminated a little while. "In a day or two—it will seem quite natural that you should come here for your meals at least—when our intimacy has a little progressed. I shall see how to lead the conversation to the subject, once or twice without insistence. We must always remember how sensitive a thing is a woman's reputation. We must not give substance for a breath of gossip, even in this quiet corner, dear milord. You see, it takes grey hairs to devise these prudential subterfuges."

The old man's smile of triumph at the subtlety of his own diplomacy was the memory that Wroth carried away with him of his host. There was a new tenderness in the lover's soul as he walked down the avenue. His dealings with his fellow-men, up to now, had mainly been unfortunate; but there was that in his misguided nature which leaped to all good things. He would have been very proud of such a father.

Juliana came down to dinner, and in pursuance of his plan of action the godfather was exceedingly

off-hand on the subject of the young Englishman, speaking of him with elaborate unconcern, as an accidental acquaintance likely to enliven their rural seclusion.

"It appears that he raves of music, so I have actually promised him a little concert to-morrow, if you will hold the piano, my cherished one."

Juliana thought the sudden spring of her heart must have been visible under her kerchief. But the old man was carefully looking away from her.

He became exceedingly conversational, and very learned on the subject of the newest music and that rising composer Gioacchino Rossini. He hummed the air of Tancredi, and desired her opinion on it. If her dear head allowed it, they might have a little practice that evening—which desire was, in due time, carried out. Juliana was a trifle absent-minded; the musician was particular, and chided and taxed her with having given up the charming art.

This kept them well occupied till ten o'clock, when he tucked his Amati lovingly back in its case.

Juliana approached to bid good night. But instead of the usual lifting of her forehead for his kiss, she flung both arms round his neck and pressed her burning cheek against his face.

"My very dear one," said he; and then he blessed her, a ceremony usually reserved for their greater partings.

Mrs. Panton was awaiting her mistress, wearing an air of more than usual importance. Juliana, with eyes that shone, with that new bloom on her cheek, could no longer allege indisposition; yet never had

she seemed more averse to conversation, more wrapt in reserve.

"I have had a walk down to the town," began the tirewoman tentatively.

"Indeed," said Juliana, who had not heard a word.

"I came across, quite by accident, his lordship's valet."

Juliana, unfastening the clasp at her breast, paused.

"Meaning Lord Wroth, of course," said Mrs. Panton, satisfied that she had struck her mark. "Your ladyship would never believe the way they've tracked us."

Her ladyship drew her brows together and dropped her eyelids. Panton could see how those released laces at her bosom rose and fell. She proceeded with increased gusto:

"After us to Dover, he went, poor young nobleman, the very night we left the Wells. Mr. Picard —a nice young man he is, that's his lordship's French valet, your ladyship—says the groom who met them by order, with the curricle, told him it was such a race as never was. One horse breaks down, and his lordship rides the other, on, on, bare-backed, only to find the ship out to sea. And when I think of that ship—" said the good woman parenthetically, "I can feel the heaving yet."

Juliana still stood, the brooch paused in mid-air, eyes downcast, listening.

"Though, indeed," cried Panton, drawing in breath with a sucking action, "if it had not been for what I can only describe as that day of terror on the waves, your ladyship, I should not have been poorly on landing at Calais, and your ladyship

might not have halted at Mr. Dessein's Hotel, and his lordship might have sought our trail in vain."

Mrs. Panton's head inclined sentimentally sideways at the thought of this tragic possibility. Juliana turned and laid the brooch on the table. Perceiving that she must speak quickly if she were to put in the end of her story, the woman ran on:

"As things turned out, it was back to London with his lordship. He picks up Mr. Picard at his London rooms, and off again post haste, post haste. He charters a boat—too early for the packet. Guineas pouring, as Mr. Picard says, on every side, and everywhere he asks for news of your ladyship. Dark lady with a fat maid (that's Mr. Picard's joke, your ladyship) and a foreign courier. At Calais pier he asks—guinea—Dessein, they say. On to Dessein's with them! And at Dessein's they tell him how your ladyship took post for Paris, and how luckily the postillion who drove her is just back with the horses. Then it's up with the postillion to my lord's room, and out with my lord's gold again. And the fellow's tongue wags willingly enough, since there never was a Frenchman yet who was not fond of the sound of his own chatter. And it's on with my lord again, and he has not slept a night in bed since the day of the marriage!"

Mrs. Panton broke off abruptly. Juliana flashed upon her a look that commanded silence, and turned back to her table again. But in the mirror the maid caught a glimpse of her mistress's face, and saw it pale now and tremulous.

"Feeding on boiled stuff they are, with a muck of cabbage soup. And the insult those inn-fellows

keep heaping on Mr. Picard's master as an Englishman, calling him behind his back unmentionable names—Goddem—and flinging Waterloo at him!"

"Panton," said Juliana, "that is quite enough; you can leave me." Her tone was all decision. But Panton halted and hesitated at the door, and in her old nurse's tones:

"Lord Wroth, my lamb——" she insinuated.

"I do not wish for any more conversation to-night," interrupted Juliana, imperiously.

"Then, good night, my lady," said the abigail in sudden dudgeon.

Juliana sat by the dressing-table, leaned her head on her hand, and pondered. Was ever woman so tossed upon conflicting seas? Panton's rambling talk had brought all the memories of that marriage day, with its audacious hopes and hideous humiliation, back upon her like a slap in the face.

Out in the sunshine, this morning, her heart had turned traitor to her pride. She had not had the strength to send him from her; and the poignant joy of his presence had followed her ever since. Yet his very presence, his pursuit, the love he dared offer her, was an outrage on his part. And yet again, by the freak of fate, no outrage since she was his wife. One word from her—she shuddered from the thought with a two-fold apprehension—what ecstasy might be hers, or what irretrievable shame! The very name of wife, he had said, is enough to kill love. Aye, but a little later, in what accents of passion had he not reproached her for what he called her betrayal? But then he deemed he had lost her. In this wild undisciplined nature, what could she trust? She had made her great cast and failed. Now, before risking

again, she must see for herself, test, study, be certain.

So Juliana resolved to keep the strange secret still close, resolved, too, that she would not oppose the plans for their meeting which sprang from Count Spiridion's innocent match-making.

CHAPTER XXI

THERE fell rain the whole of the next afternoon; the good rain that, sinking into the earth, draws life and beauty out of its heart. In the salon, except for Count Spiridion's music, it was a very quiet party. The curé, comfortably absorbed, in his special armchair, closed his eyes—to have no distractions—and thereafter slumbered frankly and almost noiselessly. He only woke up at intervals to say:

"Ah, heaven, how fine!" Or, "Music! how beautiful she is!"

He was a charming listener.

Spiridion was deep in diplomacy; all to his instrument, all to the business of the moment. When Juliana, sitting at the old harpsichord—sweet and faint and full of the echoes of ancient days—lost her place in the accompaniment, the violinist carried it through with most convincing airs of indifference. Nobody should guess that he knew why she had faltered; that he had intercepted the long, ardent glances which milord, in his corner, cast upon her—Milord Apollo, this afternoon, with a cloud over his head, no brilliancy about him, no speech on his lips, only the fire in his eyes.

The long room, with its polished floor, reflected the little group and the sparse furniture as in an amber mirror, dimly. The scent of the smouldering red logs on the hearth mingled with that of the wet garden

creeping in mistily through the open window. Ever and anon little airs would set the brocade curtains moving with slight, ghost-like rustle. From the further end of the room the brilliant youth and loveliness of Cyprienne, Comtesse de la Roche-Amand smiled down upon them from the faded gold frame. She had been Spiridion's mother, and the rosy babe on her knee, naked save for a little odd lace cap tied under his chin, had been Spiridion himself! He had a bow in his hand—he was Cupid. She, in powdered hair and blue ribands—Venus. Cupid, now grey-haired, wielded the fiddle-bow and played sad melodies. Venus, where was she? But, in this room, regret itself seemed fragrant as the *pot pourri* in the great jars.

Juliana's face, in serious beauty under the black wings of her hair, was cut, cameo-like, against the shadows as she sat apart and pressed the ivory notes. She wore some garment of grey satin, and the firelight caught the folds of it rosily, but never reached the white oval of her cheek. It was no wonder Wroth brooded upon her.

After the music there was a little conversation between Spiridion and the curé on purely local subjects. Juliana and Wroth had no words for each other; but, at parting, he took her hand.

That was all. Never had there been an afternoon with so little in it; but to the end of his days it remained one of the most perfumed memories in Wroth's heart. That day he had looked on peace, as a man may upon a cool lake from the distance. A hot and stormy road lay between him and it, but he had looked on it.

Count Spiridion called formally on the English traveller at his hotel, in Compiègne. He conducted

conversation with ease and decorum, touching the present state of politics, the unfortunate reaction, the Holy Alliance and England's wise opposition to it. . . . From Paris, and the coming departure of the allies from French soil, he arrived by easy transition to the state of the roads for tourists, to the charm of the forest of Compiègne. He had a secret smile for the young man's spasmodic efforts at response; for the unquiet glance with its perpetual question. It was only when he rose to make his *congé* that the real purpose of the ceremonial visit became revealed.

"It is to-morrow a little feast with us here. My habit, since my return to France, is to gather the children of the neighbourhood about me at this time of year, when we have some innocent rejoicing . . . a sylvan meal, under the beeches, after which the little ones look for hidden treasures in the glades. Perhaps scarcely the kind of entertainment for a young man of fashion; but——"

"May I indeed come?" interrupted Wroth, the tell-tale colour rushing to his face.

"We begin at three o'clock," said Spiridion, smiling. Then, he added, as he turned for his cane: "It is my god-daughter who is to be mistress of the games to-morrow; we are like two children ourselves in our anticipations. *Au revoir*, then, milord."

His hand was gripped with a silent eagerness.

"*Hé, hé, hé!*" said Comte Spiridion to himself, playing with his bruised fingers not without satisfaction, as he strolled pensively back towards his Mon-Repos along the familiar short cut through the Royal Park.

A beech glade in the spring; the young green on the old trees, the wonderful grey of their boles; the

primrose stars everywhere, and a sheet of bluebells breaking into blossom in the dells, ethereal as a fairy lake; the vistas into interminable woodland, with here and there the fire of young larch; the flicker and dance of the whole sylvan world, and she, Juliana, in the middle of a band of shouting, happy children—the whole scene went straight to the poet side of Wroth; while, all lover as he was, in her presence culminated all its beauty, all its ineffable message.

She wore bright flowers at her breast, and the gay mauve of her scarf fluttered flower-like itself as she ran with the players; or stood, the centre of a dancing circle; or sat to console a toddler that had come to grief in its play.

As before, Wroth and she had scarce speech with each other. Yet he could not feel that she wished him away. It was hardly so much avoidance, it seemed to him, as an exquisite waiting reserve.

The curé and Spiridion smiled, benevolent genii, upon the feast. Juliana was all to the children. After the repast they had the games; and after the games a rustic dance for which a youth, bronzed and black-haired as any Sicilian shepherd, piped reedy, sweet, flourishing rhythms on the flageolet. Juliana sat down at last, laughing, on the moss:

"Enough, enough! I am tired."

Her hair was loosened, her cheek flushed; she had not a glance towards him who watched her, motionless, from the shadow of the great beech-tree; yet he knew she felt his gaze upon her.

"The final game, *colin-maillard*," ordered the curé. The children jubilated. The spring riot began afresh, strained to its highest pitch of joy. Toto, the miller's son, the wag of the young party, flung himself, design or accident, against the milord. Though he stood aside

and seemingly so haughty, the children had no fear of him: like animals they never mistake their friends. There was no help for it; the fastidious English lord, the noted "blood" about town, the Corinthian, hard-living scapegrace—he was caught into the whirl of the infantile game.

It was Juliana's handkerchief that bound his eyes. It had circled two or three rustic heads already; but it had not lost its fragrance of her. And, as it touched his lids, from the heart of this forest of Compiègne, he was suddenly brought back to the Abbey; to the night when he had knelt so close beside her. He made a swift step: he had the vision of her though his eyes were blinded, and he caught her in his arms. Yet, no sooner had his embrace closed upon her, than it fell away. His heart stood still instantly upon a delight too great for it.

There was a shriek that brought him to his senses: "*Colin-Maillard* has let his prisoner go! A forfeit, a forfeit!" Already the urchins were tired of the game; they clamoured for the fresh amusement; it was the time for forfeits. No one but Spiridion should pronounce the forfeits—that was an established custom.

The old seigneur took seat solemnly on the grey root of a tree; and Juliana, beside him, pale now, with shadowed eyes cast down, held up, one after another, the small pledges—Toto's red tie, Mathilde's sabot, Petit Jerome's new cap. Spiridion, blindfolded in his turn, pronounced judgment. He had a most humorous and varied assortment of penalties. They were duly carried out and with great zest. At length Juliana held up a grey buckskin glove.

"Here is a thing, and a very fine thing, and what shall the owner of this fine thing do?"

Did her voice falter as it ran through the oft-repeated formula? Or was La Roche-Amand cheating and could he see under these fine-scented folds? He had a moment's hesitation. Then his fiat rang out judicially:

"He must bow to the fairest and kiss her whom he loves best."

There was a moment's silence. Something held the children breathless. Then the voice of Toto, the irrepressible, rose. He liked to show everyone the way to do things:

"*Il faut embrasser la belle dame, M'sieu le milord.*"

It was the last forfeit. Spiridion uncovered his face, finely drawn into smiles. Juliana sat close to him, her very stillness a self-betrayal for one who had the delicate instinct to understand.

"Eh, there is my young man with his pallor again. Mon Dieu, these two lovers—if I were not there to help them!"

Wroth took a step forward and bowed low before Juliana. Then again there fell the odd pause. Toto, hopping frantically from one foot to another, shrieked out his indispensable direction:

"*Si c'est que vous aimez la belle dame, faut l'embrasser aussi, M'sieu le milord.*"

Wroth fell on one knee and took Juliana's hand in his. He bent forward; she raised her eyes. Then he sprang to his feet.

"He has not kissed her," cried Toto, disgusted.

"Not even her hand," thought Spiridion, equally disappointed. He rose stiffly from the seat of judgment.

"Well, well, my children, the *fête* is over."

The sunshine had gone, the wind was suddenly cold. Even the curé, rubbing his hands and smiling

to the last, felt the flatness. These English with their priggish ways! He collected his young parishioners, to march them homewards.

Wroth had gone; some misty glade of the forest had swallowed him. Juliana and her godfather set off for Mon-Repos in silence; she leaned cn his arm, moving as one very tired.

And so ended that day.

The next morning Juliana was filling a jar with the purple plumes of iris, when Wroth appeared on the threshold of the salon.

"I come, uninvited," he said. Juliana turned with a start.

It was another day borrowed from coming summer; the green shutters were half-closed before the open windows. Prosper was cutting the grass plot in which the sundial stood. And the sighing of the scythe with the scent of the sappy young grass filled the air. Spiridion was out, making the round of his woods with the keeper. Juliana felt singularly unprotected, singularly at the mercy of the spring tenderness, of her stormy wooer and her own weakness. It seemed to her all too soon for the great surrender. A thousand virginal repugnances woke within her at the mere thought. Should she speak now: like Juliet she could have no joy of the contract.

And yet she had had a wakeful night from sheer happiness that he had not paid the forfeit in that childish play which was so serious for those two; that, with that flame in his eye, he had spared her. But at her first glance at him, as he came up to her table and halted opposite to her, she was aware that the bad mood was upon him. The look that had driven her from the very air he breathed, that had

haunted her in her flight, was again in his eye; the twist of his evil smile was on his lip. Wroth's good angel had departed; about him was the shadow of dark wings.

Her strength seemed suddenly to give way; she fell into a chair. He took one facing her. All his movements were marked with deliberation; he had closed the door behind him as he entered; his voice was steady, so were his hands as he slowly ungloved them.

"You have not wished me good morning," said Juliana, as the tension of the silence grew unbearable to her.

"No," he replied, "I have another greeting for you, as you for me. You know what you owe me since yesterday. I have waited all through the interminable night for this respectable, conventional hour. Have I not been patient?"

Juliana felt the blood rush to her temples, and as quickly back to her heart. The sense of helplessness increased upon her. If he now took from her lips the kiss that was to be sacred seal to her revelation, she must indeed speak; but it would be in shame, with inexpressible reluctance. It must be to bid him leave the wife, since he had failed to honour the woman.

He rose abruptly and stood close to her. Her eyelids fell from the sight of him. Yet, even as in the beech glade, she did not turn her head nor droop it from him.

"Oh," he cried, fury in his voice. "Juliana, you drive me mad! You are not fair to me, you are not fair to me, Juliana. These weary hours I have thought of nothing but your lips—and now, as you sit there, I could as soon touch them as strike a

child. Oh, in truth, love has not come your way!" Backwards and forwards he paced, as he stormed. "I might have known it. Cold, cold as ice, you stood and taunted me when I had lost you. Aye, when I had lost you!"

Juliana followed him with her eyes, great with unshed tears.

"Heaven preserve me from a good woman!" he went on bitterly. "Oh, you had a man's soul in your hands, and you flung him to perdition upon this icy prudery. What are those tears for? There is no help in tears for us; I want your smiles, aye, and your kisses, your kisses, my only love! Cold saint, what have I to do with you? I will have the woman of the Abbey, with her deep gaze of tenderness. You drew me into your soul, that night. But to-day, this day of spring, this day made for us, you sit as stone, and offer me what? Tears! And all because of some mummery, some words muttered between two whose hearts mocked the promise they made, because of a blessing mumbled to order! Ye Gods, I am the married man on that! And fie, cries virtue, approach me not!"

"You are speaking very loud, milord," said Spiridion's grave voice.

He came in upon them through the open French window. Juliana turned her head, but could not speak; her lip quivered piteously. The tears that had been slowly welling suddenly fell down the pale cheeks. At the sight Spiridion's heart leaped.

"Milord," he went on, trembling with anger, "I have not heard much of what you were saying so hotly and my ear is unfamiliar with your speech, but my dear one's face is eloquent: you have pained her, milord. Perhaps, *Dieu me pardonne*, insulted

her! What gross mistake have I been making here, sir?"

"I beg you, dear Godfather——" faltered Juliana.

The young man stood, looking from one to the other with hard eyes.

"Let Madame explain how it stands between her and me," he said brutally. "Ah," he cried, with his bad laugh, "she has told you nothing, then? She has allowed you to bring us together, for which, *mon cher Comte,* I am deeply obliged." He bowed ironically. Then his eyes flared back upon the woman: "You were not such adamant but that you wanted at least to see me again. Oh, Juliana, I am patient. I can wait. I shall wait!"

He threw his hand out at her with a gesture of intolerable mastery, intolerable menace. There was a triumph about him that was almost that of a madman. The chivalric Comte de la Roche-Amand suffocated. He took two steps to place himself between them.

"Milord——" he began huskily.

But here his voice was drowned and his purpose confused by loud crunching sounds on the gravel of the terrace. Wheels, of which they had been all too much absorbed to notice the approach, were rolling up to the very door.

"Milord," resumed the old Count then, with his air of antique dignity, "there arrives to me, it seems, an unexpected visit. We must speak together later. My dear daughter, would you not prefer to retire? Yes? Let me conduct you to your room."

Juliana, rising, mechanically placed her hand in his. But ere she had taken a step, she paused. The sound of a high, defiant voice from the hall struck her ear.

"Announce Lady Wroth—Miladi Wroth," it was commanding in broken French.

Juliana felt Spiridion's convulsive start. Her eyes sought Wroth's—nothing could have kept their gaze from commingling at that moment. No surprise was on his countenance—nothing but a livid rage, and in his eyes the evil fire. Those eyes said: "All this is nothing to me. Let her come; you are mine."

Strength came back to her with a stab of outraged pride.

"You are right, Godfather, bring me away from this," she said determinedly. On the threshold she swept past Peggie (for it was Peggie, fair and flaunting, with an insolent smile, yet a shifting and uneasy, inquiring glance), gave her but one hard, commanding look, and moved away, leaning upon Spiridion's arm.

But at the foot of the stairs she paused and shuddered: Wroth's laugh—the laugh of his wedding feast—pursued her.

CHAPTER XXII

In the execution of her mad freak Peggie had evidently come prepared for more than one eventuality, but hardly for that of finding herself face to face with Juliana at the very outset of her interview with Wroth. And her heart began to beat heavily against her fair bosom.

But her foster-sister's imperious look, the whole expression of her attitude as she had silently passed by, was more than sufficient to convince the girl, with the quick-wittedness that served her in lieu of deeper judgment, that Juliana was still unpacified and still bent upon keeping her secret.

The situation seemed to Peggie as silly as it was incomprehensible; but it suited her game. For some time longer, then, she, Peggie, was still to be Lady Wroth; she saw her way clear, at any rate, for the moment.

In her best theatrical manner she acknowledged the grave, almost hostile, bow that the Comte de la Roche-Amand had made to her before passing out; then she entered the salon.

She turned then upon Wroth with a magnificent swoop of silks. His greeting would have brought confirmation of her quick surmises, had confirmation been required.

"Lady Wroth—Lady Wroth!" He ground the words between his teeth. "I might have known it!

I have been dogged by curses ever since I was born."

Peggie stood a moment silent, then closed the door with an affectation of ease and came forward, eager, expectant—though of what she hardly knew herself. She was alone with the man she loved, in the most extraordinary of situations. If the fates inspired her to play her cards well, what a hand she held! She flounced into a seat as much because her knees were trembling under her, as because of the greater dignity she felt it would give to her attitude.

He stood by the window, his back now towards her; the shafts of sunlight piercing through the laths of the shutters were striping his broad shoulders. Her eyes rested on him admiringly. Then she began, her heart beating into her voice. Yet it was with a taunt she began. Peggie, like most of her class, knew no better way of challenging the masculine interest.

"You are not particularly polite, my lord and husband, are you?" She tittered nervously and gasped for breath. "Nor very consistent. I'm not to run away with any other man; I'm not to come after you. A kind of dog-in-the-manger situation, this, isn't it?"

Still the averted head; still the turned shoulder. She thought, vaguely, that his hair was like fire in that bar of sunshine. And then, with a fresh gasp and titter, she shot her second arrow:

"Yes, indeed, I think you're scarcely gallant, Lord Wroth. When a lady takes the trouble to come all the way from England to see you, and that lady happens to be your wife, by your own choice, it would be prettier manners not to stand there with your back

to her! If you did not want to be found out, dear George!"—she said the word with a new affectation—"you should not let your servants sell your secrets so cheap. I got the address for a crown—'pon honour—at your lordship's London rooms. And, indeed," she repeated, as Wroth's silence and immobility began to provoke her out of the tremulous emotion into which his presence had cast her—"indeed, when you are in pursuit of another lady, a lady who"—her tongue tripped—"whom, I mean, you did not select to wed, my lord, why, a little more discretion in your proceedings might have been becoming. Eh, my lord—dear George, have you nothing to say to me?" Here fury all at once seized her. Her voice broke shrilly. "And so it's the prude, the fine countess, the good woman, who's keeping another body's husband from her!"

Even as she spoke, Peggie, in her histrionic excitability, was overcome by the conviction that she was deeply injured. But the next phrase of vituperation that came leaping to her lips was strangled by sheer terror as he wheeled round upon her at last, a dark figure against the barred sunlight of the window. With slow step he swung up to her and halted; and then she saw that his face was extraordinarily pale even for him. "He looks like the devil himself," she thought, and cringed, then tried to stiffen her courage.

He folded his arms, as if to keep himself from touching her, and she saw that they trembled. "For two pins he'd throttle me!" flashed through her head. His voice, however, was very low as he spoke; and very few were the words he said. But they were charged with loathing:

"The bargain was that you were to keep out of my way—not to venture within my presence. You know

what you married me for—well, you got it. If you come under my eyes again, you lose it; take that as my last warning. Begone out of this house. How dare you sit in her chair—begone, I say!"

He flung out one hand, pointing to the door with a gesture of indescribable fierceness. She gave a kind of sobbing scream and subsided at his feet, half in real, half in theatrical anguish.

"George, George, you're cruel! What bargain? I made no bargain."

He started back from her touch.

"God! woman, don't you see I am capable of murder——"

She heard the door open, and through her dishevelled hair (an artful touch or two had wrought disorder into that wealth of yellow curls) she saw the grey-headed gentleman stand looking in upon them with anger and disdain. Then she crouched again picturesquely on the floor and broke into wild weeping.

"Milord," said Spiridion, "this passes all bounds! I pray you make no scandal in my house. For me, an old man, it is of little consequence. But I have a guest, and her I will protect. I must beg you, since it seems this is milady, your wife, to take her away with you. This instant. Her carriage still waits."

Wroth stood glaring at the speaker a second; cast then a look at Peggie on the floor, turned from her and with a quick stealthy leap, sprang from the window into the garden. His running steps were heard for a moment, crunching on the path, and were lost.

"Milady," said the distressed old Count, laying his hand on Peggie's heaving shoulder, "pray, allow me—let me assist you to rise."

She lifted her streaming face. "Heavens," she moaned, "he is my husband, and I love him!" Then she marked the severity of his gaze; and dimmed with tears though her eyes were, they were able to read inexorable dismissal. She had no notion of relinquishing her post of vantage in the house of her enemy. So, seeing that there was nothing for it but a swoon, she swooned.

In the sitting-room which opened off her apartment, Juliana sat at her table, deliberately absorbed in a business letter to her Italian factor, when Spiridion knocked at the door and entered upon her.

"Well, is she gone?"

She had not turned from her task; her tone was dry. The Comte gazed in a bewildered way for a moment at the knot of dense black hair surmounting the nape of her neck, warm ivory against the escaping dark tendrils. He had lost his bearings completely—poor old matchmaker! What an incomprehensible business was this! Had Juliana known of her lover's marriage? Had she but learned it this morning, when he had found her pale and with tearful eyes in that scene in which milord had talked so loud and which had left him in such bitter anger? Certain it was that Juliana had displayed none of the anguish with which the entrance of Lady Wroth must have overwhelmed her, had she hitherto been unaware of her existence?

Juliana wheeled round as if impatient at his silence.

"That woman, has she gone?" she repeated.

"It is noticeable," thought Spiridion, "that it is not his departure she demands." And he felt strangely embarrassed before this Juliana he did not know, wanting the smallest clue to her story, painfully conscious

of the irritation and scorn written on her countenance; conscious also that the news he was bringing would but serve to increase them.

"My child——" He hesitated. "The lady, the stranger — she is taken ill. Overcome by distress. A woman in distress, in a fainting condition, dear Juliana——"

Juliana rose sharply to her feet; a quiver ran through her as she poised herself. The pansy eyes turned steel.

"You have not kept her here?"

"My dear," said the old man gravely, "I could not turn her out. Have you not understood? She is ill."

"Oh, she—ill!"

Juliana sat down again as abruptly as she had risen. She beat the back of her chair, once or twice; then she spoke again, more quietly, yet with that hard quality of voice that, coming from her lips, caused positive suffering to the listener.

"Your roof cannot shelter both of us, *parrain*."

"My beloved," he protested, haggard with the distress of thwarting her, "my little Juliana, but I tell you she is prostrate. Madame Thomas is in attendance upon her. I have placed her away in the west wing. In common humanity—my daughter. Think. Abandoned by her husband——"

A singular smile passed over her lips. Spiridion had never thought of seeing such a smile on them.

"Her husband has abandoned her, has he?" she asked.

"He jumped out of the window, like a madman. When I came into the room the poor young creature was at his feet, in tears."

"The whole thing sickens me!" cried Juliana with

sudden violence. "I will hear no more—let me finish my letter."

She turned back on her chair again. The Comte de la Roche-Amand stood a moment longer, gazing upon her. From its expression of anxious doubt, his face settled into lines of sternness. Without another word he left the room.

Juliana went on writing steadily till she had finished her letter. It was concluded, however, with a sentence that its opening had not forecast: "I will myself be in Florence within a week after you receive this. Have all in readiness." Then she rang sharply for Panton. As the woman entered, all bustle and indignation, with yet a twinkle of humour in her flushed countenance, her mistress forestalled her, repressively:

"Panton, that creature is here. I don't want your views of the matter. I want you to pack."

The twinkle vanished from Panton's eye. Dismay took its place.

"Your ladyship——"

"That is enough; we leave to-morrow morning. Warn Annibale."

"'Pon my word, your ladyship, what with packing and unpacking, running after and running away, it's a very queer business your ladyship is making of it all. I will speak, I must, my lady!" said the woman, stoutly, planting her physical as well as her moral amplitude determinedly before her mistress. "It's high time your ladyship should tell the poor young nobleman what's what. As to that trollop there—no more ill than I am, my lady, but just taking in the old gentleman and that Frenchwoman of his, with her sobs and her swounds—it's high time my lord should know she's as much his wife as I am. You're acting

against the Bible and against nature, your ladyship, and mischief will come of it. Would not anybody be glad to have such a fine young man as her husband? What if his hair's red? your ladyship liked him well enough to go all the way back to England after him. It was your ladyship's done it, you should remember that."

"Go and pack, Panton," said Juliana.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE sitting-room allotted to milord, at the Écu de France, in Compiègne, was dimly lit by a couple of candles. At first M. de la Roche-Amand failed to distinguish the figure of Wroth in the window recess, where he sat gazing through the open casement upon the waning afterglow. A large, square letter, seal uppermost, on the table, made a single spot of white in the dingy and shadowed surroundings. At the sound of the closing door, however, the young man rose and came forward into the room. He halted by the table and, resting one hand upon it, waited for the unexpected visitor to speak. In the flickering candle-light his face bore the stamp of exhaustion. Yet there was on it, withal, a new serenity which checked the first impetuous speech rising to Spiridion's lips.

"Singular youth!" thought he, and hesitated a moment; then it was more in gravity than in anger that he began:

"Milord, no doubt, will not be surprised when I tell him my business with him to-night."

The shadow of a smile passed over Wroth's face.

"I don't think I feel as if anything could surprise me," he said rather wearily. "But will you not be seated, Monsieur le Comte?"

"No, sir," said the old nobleman sternly. "What I have to say is always, as you know, said standing."

Surprise, after all, wrote itself momentarily on the young, tired face. Wroth's eyebrows were raised, and he shot a glance, mischievously amused, at the solemn countenance in front of him. Then the emotion passed and he dropped his lids.

"Speak, sir, then."

Spiridion cleared his throat. He had repaired to the Écu de France upon a very unwonted impulse of indignation. The Englishman's behaviour could only be described as infamous. It was almost as cynically treacherous towards himself as towards two women who had also trusted him—to their sorrow. Yet, in spite of himself, now that the culprit was before him again, he felt his fine anger ebbing away at the mere sight of that beautiful young manhood.

"This fellow is positively a danger to society," thought the Count, striving to raise himself once more to the requisite pitch. "Even I must struggle against the charm. Milord," he went on aloud, very solemnly, "I must beg you to excuse me for departing from the usual formalities. Owing to the peculiar circumstances of the case I can think of no friend to whom I can depute so delicate a task. Therefore must I come to you, personally, to demand that satisfaction which you owe me. You have insulted, sir, and grieved, a lady who honours me by accepting my hospitality and protection. More need not be said. I do not wish even to mention her name. I will pursue the subject no further; I demand satisfaction, milord. And the swifter the better."

Wroth stood, during these words, with eyes cast down, very still. And for an appreciable moment, after the Comte had ceased, the young man remained lost in thought. Then he suddenly looked up and fixed the full fire of his eyes upon Spiridion; a smile of

wonderful sweetness accompanied the gaze. He leaned forward, resting both hands on the table.

"M. le Comte, I will give you satisfaction."

His voice had a husky, almost tender, note. The old man felt himself more and more drawn under the charm. Bewildered, he cried, still clinging to his position:

"It is well, then; I expected no less. To be informal to the end, the details, milord, can be settled now between us."

"Yes, the details," said Wroth.

He flung back his head with a laugh. There was nothing offensive this time in its boyish ring. He stepped up to the Count, and to the latter's speechless astonishment took his hand.

"Sir," he continued, in his pleasantly accented French, "allow me to say it to you—I honour you. From the first moment I saw you, sir, I said to myself, 'If he were my father, how different a man I should be.' M. le Comte, one does not fight a man whom one would honour as a father, one asks his pardon."

"Milord? . . . my dear boy!" said Spiridion, forgetting everything under a wave of emotion. He laid both hands on Wroth's shoulders with a gesture that was almost an embrace; and then dropped them and stared in blank surprise, amazed at himself and at the absurd turn in the situation.

"M. le Comte," pursued Wroth, with a deep air of courtesy, "will you not now be seated?"

La Roche-Amand, with the same air of helpless astonishment, let himself sink into the chair indicated; then a sudden humorous chuckle escaped him.

"Come, come," he said, "if white-haired men cannot be champions, they have at least the privilege that they can forego with grace. Yet, young man," he grew grave

in voice and air as he continued, "nothing, so far, is changed in the facts."

"I promised you satisfaction," said Wroth gently. "Will you listen to me?"

He looked so tired, so young; there was such an exquisite respect in his manner that Spiridion's heart melted altogether. Before he had heard his tale, the case had been prejudiced by the old man and in the young one's favour. Indeed, it would have required a harder nature than that of La Roche-Amand, a narrower outlook on life and less sympathy with youth, its passions and sorrows, to have resisted the appeal of the story.

In the square facing the hotel the *réverbère* was lit and flung a yellow beam into the dim room. It looked almost orange against the sombre rows of chestnut-trees. From turquoise and primrose and interweaving chrysoprase-green, the sky was setting into the misty blue of evening. There was little noise outside; the occasional rumble of a cart, the tramp of labourers returning homeward, now and again voluble French voices, filling the night and passing on.

Wroth began in the same tired accents that had characterised his speech all through. Now and again only his voice rang out passionately. Spiridion set himself to listen, scarce interrupting by a word, his hands loosely clasped between his knees, his head bent. His attitude, for a while, was somewhat like that of the priest in the confessional, prepared for a tale of conventional error and folly. But very soon he straightened himself and turned to the speaker, amazed, stirred to sympathy, almost to enthusiasm.

Not only was the life that Wroth laid bare to his listener that of a rare, of an audacious soul, deeply feeling and greatly aspiring, but the young man had

the gift of expression. His words were simple mostly; but he had pauses and reserves, sudden outbursts, that illumined as with a flash of genius. Spiridion saw the solitary, unloved, misunderstood child and his fatherly heart bled for him. He was carried along by the turmoil of a wild youth, perpetually flung back from its highest flights; beheld that youth set for manhood under lurid skies, charged with cloud, fired by lightning; saw the promising existence doomed, it seemed, to destruction, doomed to go down in the storm, in the darkness, when, like a star, Juliana shone out upon him.

"She came to me," said Wroth in his low, veiled tones, "out of the night. We were at revels in my old Abbey, blasphemous revels—a dozen of those good friends of mine you have just heard about, masquerading it in monks' robes, and I as the prior—she never told you? It is like her to be silent; I loved her first for her wonderful silence. She came in upon us. When I saw her face——"

Then he fell himself upon one of those pauses more eloquent than speech. Spiridion nodded dreamily. He remembered how the child Juliana had come into his own desolation. Over the tempest of this reckless young life . . . and in the dead melancholy dusk of his own bereft existence, the same star!

"When we looked upon each other, when her eyes met mine, I knew I loved her," went on Wroth at last. "I had an hour—an hour with her alone, in the silent ruined church." Once again came the high break of passion into words and voice: "I never even touched her hand. She told me she was not free. But she gave herself to me then, and she knows it, as I to her—soul to soul." He faltered on that. Spiridion could find no words; he made a gesture as if to touch in

sympathy the young passionate hand that beat the table, and then drew back before a depth of feeling that forbade comradeship. Suddenly the hand fell still. "That was a year ago. She failed me." This was spoken calmly—with a dead weariness.

"Poor boy," said Spiridion to himself; "how he has suffered!"

"She became free, she knew where to find me. From the instant of the drawing of that last breath that set her free, straight she should have come to me. At least, she should have sent me a message—warned me. She waited her mourning months—her conventional mourning months! Oh! She came, she was still in time; she came; it was to fail me again! She saw me on the edge of the abyss—she would not put out her hand to save me!"

The lines about his face grew ever more bitter as he spoke. Spiridion's gentle nature was flooded with compassion.

"The abyss—my poor friend?" he hazarded. "Marriage with another woman?" He thought he understood; some old entanglement with another woman. And Juliana's pride, he knew her pride—no, she would not have spoken! "But, it was you who failed then," he cried, with quick revulsion of feeling. His Juliana, before the year of widowhood out, coming to seek her lover—her lover of an hour, whose hand she had never even touched (*la singulière histoire!*), and to find him pledged to another woman!

Wroth fixed him with a haggard look.

"I?" he cried. Storm broke loose in him: a torrent of words. In language of flame, he told the story of his extraordinary, his unholy pact; the devilish tempting by his lawyer, his mad freak, the scene in the tavern-room, his choice, the black figure,

the veiled one who was Juliana—Juliana who stood and watched him go to his doom and never stretched her hand to save him!

La Roche-Amand sat breathless.

"She brought herself to that," he exclaimed at last, "to stand in that room, with those creatures, for you to choose her! . . . *Eh, comment donc,* how is it you do not understand, you who loved her? She could do that much: she could do no more. What, unveil herself, speak a word in such a place, touch you, you, who could not feel her presence? But, oh unhappy one, and you chose that other——"

Wroth stared again; then gave one long sigh and leant his forehead on his hand. Had he wept, or even groaned, it would not have gone to Spiridion's heart so keenly. The old man rose from his seat and paced the room in agitation; broken phrases escaping him. "These poor children! My poor children! *Mon Dieu!* what a story, what mismanagement! If I had but known you, if she had but come to me! She never came to me—eh, but they love each other, these poor children!" He tapped his forehead, halted by the other's chair. "Listen, milord——"

"I'll never give her up," said Wroth, lifting his eyes. "If she goes to the end of the world I'll go after her. She belongs to me, no one else shall ever have her."

"Tut, tut!" said Spiridion irritably. "That's not the question just now, young madman. What we have to do is to find some way out of the maze—that marriage of yours, why, even in my Church it could be put aside! With you Protestants and your divorce, why, sir——"

Wroth stretched forward and turned over the letter that lay with the big seal uppermost on the table.

"I have just written to the man who inveigled me into this pretty contract, to the worthy family lawyer . . . who acted for the best, who did—what was it he called it?—some rather equivocal things for my sake, for the sake of the money-bags, to save me from ruin. You see," continued Wroth, raising a haggard look, "I sold myself; I sold my soul for money. You could not expect a lawyer to think of a client's soul, I suppose." He was shaken by a bitter laugh; then, with a gesture of utter weariness, flung his arm across the table and dropped his head upon it.

"Yes, yes, my young friend," said Spiridion. He understood little enough of the intricacies of the legal situation; but the facts were patent enough; and so were the boy's sincerity and misery. "You say you have written to your lawyer?"

"That he must break the marriage—set me free," replied the other dully. "That he must move heaven and earth, hell, if he likes, and set me free. I'd be a beggar—literally; worse than a beggar."

"Eh, *mon Dieu!*" interrupted Spiridion eagerly.

"Oh, I know that would not matter, I know now that nothing matters except her and me. But he cannot do it, Minchin cannot do it, not without ruining himself . . . and I can't ruin him, Count, not even for her!"

He lifted his head to fix his friend with a hopeless glance. Spiridion, looked perplexedly down at him, then his face cleared.

"At least you have written, that was the right thing. If you fail——"

"I'll never give her up," said Wroth.

The quiet way in which he said it was more expressive of determination than all his former passion.

La Roche-Amand stood a while in silence. It was all very wrong; most reprehensible, no doubt. This rash young man had but paid the penalty of recklessness in his money entanglements. The mad marriage was a desecration of all that should be held sacred. The pursuit of Juliana afterwards was morally indefensible. Yet his sympathies were flowing out to the culprit, unchecked by facts.

"With my whole heart I wish you good," he cried at last.

"Thank you," said Wroth.

He rose from his seat to hand his guest his hat and cane. Their hands met. Spiridion had come, thirsting for blood; as he took his departure he was longing to take the sinner to his heart, as a father his son.

"I shall be thinking very seriously this night about it all. I shall inform myself, I shall consider. . . ."

As he took his homeward way through the gloom of the woods he was haunted by the echo of Wroth's exhausted voice, by his pallid face and shadowed eyes. Juliana, wheeling round upon him, superb in anger, had shown no such symptoms of distress. Juliana, who had stood aside and watched her lover doom herself. Strange—strange!

"Women can be very hard sometimes," thought Spiridion the old man, even as Wroth the young, "aye, and good women the hardest of all!"

On the subsequent morning Wroth was awakened by his valet, who brought him a letter. It was early; the birds were clamouring in the chestnut trees and the sunshine was radiant, but the world still cold. Spiridion had written, evidently in great perturbation:

Mon jeune ami, *there is no help for it. Nothing will serve Juliana but she must leave for her Italy, this very day. It is, perhaps, best so. Frankly the situation is impossible. Lady Wroth is in my house, and declares herself too ill to leave. I know not how it may be; I cannot turn her out by force. Separation between you and Juliana is no doubt demanded, for the present, by the most elementary discretion and delicacy. Yet I am loth to think of the pain it will give you. I shall escort her, I shall remain with her. I shall be expecting news from you. Be reasonable,* mon enfant, *be patient, be prudent. We leave immediately; she does not wish to see you before her departure.*

Wroth read the letter twice. His brow remained clear. He called for ink and paper, penned a line and, having folded and sealed it with a wafer, bade his servant convey the missive instantly to the château.

What he had written was short and to the point:

Wherever she goes, whatever happens, I follow.

WROTH.

. . . . . .

Peggie lay in the great bed, in the great bedchamber, the oddest presence in such a haunt of reserved and delicate memories. The impudent prettiness of her face looked out between the curtains of faded mauve brocade, which had shaded two generations of severely aristocratic dowagers. She was harboured in the *appartement de la comtesse-mère,* as was still known that wing, solemnly consecrated in the days of Mon-Repos's prosperous life, to worthy and honoured age.

On the back of the *prie-Dieu* her big hat hung rakishly, its emerald plume startling the dim violets, the fainting lilacs of panel and hangings. Her crude scent overpowered the lurking fragrance of lavender. A gaping trunk disgorged billows of tawdry finery. Peggie liked high colour in everything. A pair of scarlet gold-embroidered sandals stood at pert angles, close to the aggressive sheen of the orange-satin morning robe, which made a note of discordancy on the "dying roses" of the embroidered quilt. The spirit of the room—that of the *grande dame*, the old lady, the *dévote*—seemed to be shrinking, amazed, shocked, reprobating, from this garish occupant.

Peggie herself was not much better pleased—a dingy old place, a gloomy old bed. . . . She wanted to be up and doing, to be out in the sunshine, making mischief, living her life as instinct prompted, and here she was—stuck! She had a fine appetite; and under Madame Thomas's gimlet black eyes, she had had to check herself in the midst of her crusty roll, to keep up those airs of illness which alone justified her presence in this coign of vantage.

Like those of most such intriguers, Peggie's plots were all for her immediate gratification; the next step was always a matter of perplexity, to be solved by impulse.

As she lay, nursing her boredom, forming and rejecting a score of idle impossible plans for the day, an idea flickered into her mind as idly as a butterfly, yet it alighted. And the more Peggie contemplated it, the more her irresponsible humour took pleasure in it, although it involved so complete an alteration of *venue* and a total stultifying of her original schemes. "My lord will come up after his fancy, no doubt," thought she, "somewhere about noon. And about

that time, Peggie Beljoy will have recovered of the megrims of Lady Wroth. . . . Brilliant, irresistible, sparkling! I'll wear the turquoise taffety—nay, I'll wear the shot silk and the blue velvet mantle—by Cupid, it will be a rich joke! And he'll learn from my own lips, that though he chose me, it was the black dummy he got tied to. Yes, my lord, tied, tied, tied! Then, my lady, we'll see whether he'll rather have the Mourning Bride, after all——"

She sat up in bed, and clasped her knees. The scene painted itself on her vivid imagination. Her heart began to beat quickly. Lord Wroth had chosen her with his eyes open. Her, Peggie. He had told her with his own lips that it was but the wedding-ring that kept him from love. "I declare, when I look at her, boys, I almost wish I had not married her, for, by my soul . . . there is something about the minx." . . . How would it fare with that stock, that dummy then? "She took him from me, the mean wretch that she is! I'll take him from her, now. Fool that I was not to see the way before—when he pointed it so clear! That will be wiping out old scores, with a vengeance!"

She caught at the bell-rope, exultingly. When Madame Thomas appeared, the actress's cheek repeated the hue of the scarlet shoes as she turned her eager face.

"I want to get up," she supplemented the English words with vehement gestures and an ill-pronounced tag of French. "*Lever—bain—robes!*"

"Madame has fever," pronounced the housekeeper judicially. She placed her hard withered fingers on the girl's shoulders; then she broke into a torrent of exclamations and recommendations from which, though failing to understand a single whole sentence, Peggie

nevertheless gathered an impression which startled her.

Madame Thomas concluded by drawing a letter from the pocket of her blue apron. The girl snatched it and tore it open.

It was written in a fine elaborate hand; and from the quaintness of its phraseology had evidently been completed with the help of a dictionary. But Peggie gave little heed to anything except its purport.

Gone! They were gone; and Milady Wroth was to accept the hospitality of this residence, which was placed entirely at her disposal until she was quite restored from her indisposition.

She had driven them away; they had fled from her—the silly old man and that stock of a Juliana! She gave a short angry laugh. Well, she would have it all her own way now. The sooner they met, she and her beautiful Wroth, the better! She called on Madame Thomas with much gesticulation for pen and paper.

"A letter, a letter for my lord, to be sent at once—*vite, vite hôtel.*"

But, instead of obeying, the old Frenchwoman shook her head. She had a grave air, half reprobation, half compassion.

"*Pas la peine, Madame. Milord parti aussi.*"

"What?" screamed Peggie, turning livid.

Madame Thomas spread her hands and flung out her arms with unmistakable gesture.

"Yes, gone—after the beautiful lady and M. le Comte!"

If the words had been printed for her in her own tongue they could not have penetrated more completely to Peggie's intelligence. They had dropped her out of their lives, flung her from them as the wave flings the seaweed on the beach. Gone together! Gone, it was

borne in upon her, to love and happiness while she——

It was as if the sudden fury that seized her would rend her. She wanted to scream; something rose in her throat and strangled her. As she fought against it, it seemed to snap; and then there was the dreaded acrid-sweet taste, the choking rush. The old terror, never forgotten, rose and held her in its grip. The swoon she had simulated the day before came upon her now in grim earnest.

"*Ah, bonté divine,*" screamed Madame Thomas, ran desperately to the door to shriek for Prosper, and back again to the bed. "After all, she is ill for good! Quick, to the doctor, Prosper! The English milady is spitting blood—she is dying—*Seigneur mon Dieu!*"

But one thing in this world Peggie was determined on above all others, and that was not to let herself die.

She was to keep absolutely quiet, said the doctor, half an hour later; speak no word; drink milk. It might be a matter of several weeks. At any rate, for many days she should lie and not even wag her little finger.

And Madame Thomas was solemnly installed the nurse and guardian of Milady Wroth.

CHAPTER XXIV

"O FOR the happy time when I was so unhappy," once wrote a woman of many-hued experiences. Wonderful alchemy of youth and love, which transforms the iron of sorrows, uncertainty, fret, disappointment, jealous anguish, into the gold of life! Had either Wroth or Juliana been questioned upon the state of their feelings during that journey from France to Italy—she in determined flight, he in inexorable pursuit—both would have given the same answer: I am unhappy; I am in doubt, in misery! And yet, perhaps, of all their life's memories, this one was destined to become the most tender, the most exquisite, most to be recalled in later years with a smile and a sigh.

The traject from Compiègne to Paris, by the great North Road of France, gained for Wroth a stage of comfort over Juliana. For she had yet no knowledge of his escort. Spiridion, although the lover's peremptory statement lay in his breast pocket and he could hear the sheet crackle now and then as he moved, kept his counsel. Certain things are better ignored, especially when there is a lurking desire for their accomplishment. If he chose to regard milord's announcement as a mere lover's oath, who could blame him? In any case, the roads were free to all.

He was extraordinarily attentive to his companion; but she thought him restless and unlike himself. Two or three times during the passage he hung his grey

head out of the window, looking back upon the highway.

"You regret Mon-Repos," she cried at last. "My dear godfather, I repeat, this sacrifice is needless."

La Roche-Amand had a guilty haste in his protestations. Though she would have died rather than show it to him, there was reluctance, even for him and his company, in Juliana's heart. Could the silent woman only have spoken! But the flow of passion was flung back upon her heart; and what should have been a spring of such might and purity was turning to stagnant and bitter waters. Common-sense, in the voice of Mrs. Panton, and an insidious weakness in her own blood, bade her profit of her act: speak, yield, take her happiness. But something else, stronger within her, a chaste instinct outraged, refused. A subtle change had taken place in her feelings: she had come to a clear understanding with herself. The former hesitation, the dread of humiliation, had vanished; paltry shadowy scruples, they had fled before the substance, the reality, that faced her.

Wroth loved her with an unworthy love. To this passion, were she in the eyes of the whole world, as she was in her secret knowledge, his wife, she would not give herself. So from a sudden clarity of vision had risen her firm resolve: she would not step down to him if he could not rise to her. The very height of her own feeling, its very strength and grandeur and completeness, demanded a like response. Rather separation from the outset, rather this poignant and bitter sorrow, than baseness of surrender against her own conception of honour.

Yet she loved him. . . .

Thus was that first day of travel a blank page in the book of her life. Whereas Wroth, sullen enough

at heart and dispirited as he trotted doggedly along in her wake, yet gathered unconsciously to his heart the first of a series of unforgettable impressions. The lover, who wants so much, finds joy in so little. Inconsequent, absurd, adorable state! To mark from some hill-top the cloud of dust left in the train of Spiridion's berline, was it not to know that, in spite of those rolling wheels, he was in touch with her? There was no weariness in the miles that gave him this boon. He had to be very wary: his instinct told him that precipitate action now would be fatal to his hopes. But he could halt in his turn at the roadside inn where she had dined; drink from the glass her lips had touched. The wine might be harsh and thin, but it was a draught for a god. Then there was the gallop, with the wind singing in his ears, the exultation of the chase which brought him once more within sight of the cloud, and there were all the emotions of reunion, as the unsubstantial vision met his gaze from the far distance.

The chill dusk was falling as they entered the suburbs of Paris. The travellers had had to make a *détour* eastward, towards Vincennes, to avoid the last few miles of northern roads, blocked on that day by encampments of Russian troops whose exodus from the capital had lately begun; and the journey was thus delayed beyond the anticipated hour. Under the cover of traffic and gathering darkness Wroth ventured to push within a few yards of the coach. The rare oil lamps were being kindled within the empty gaunt Place du Trône, and gave ghostly grandeur to its huge abandoned spaces, to the sordidness of its fallen state. The great column of the barrier loomed in the twilight with a false stateliness. It was here, when the berline turned abruptly south upon the broad pavement, that

Wroth had a dim vision of Juliana's face—evanescent, palely drawn within the black frame of the window. It lasted only for the space of realisation; but the lover's mind caught and held it. Through the whole of the subsequent evening and night it went with him, as with a fragrance of some white flower; as with some dying fall of music in the ear.

It was early morning in Paris; oblique rays of spring sunshine glistened on roof and gable and were struck back from the upper windows; light clear breezes set the crinkled chestnut leaves dancing, and wafted pleasant odours of fresh roast coffee and fresh baked bread through the streets. Paris, still under the heel of the conquerors and still a city of captivity and mourning, kept, in spite of all, the spirit of Gallic cheerfulness indomitable within her. At this hour, in London, the lazy world would scarcely be beginning to stir; here the working population was already abroad; bustling *ménagères* trotting to market, work-girls to their shops, vendors rending the air with their endlessly varied street-cries. The day of toil was started with zest; they knew each other, most of the breadwinners, and cheery greetings flew between them. In spite of the savage teaching of revolutions and reactions, Parisians were still polite to each other; and the liveried porter of the great mansion saluted the little old woman from the attics opposite with a fine sweep of gold-laced cap, which she received as graciously as if she had been his mistress, the duchesse, acknowledging the courtesy of M. de Talleyrand.

It was only when some uniforms of the armies of occupation passed among them that these irresponsible children of the great city seemed to remember the past agonies of struggle, the present bitterness of subjection.

Bearded, unkempt Cossacks with shaggy pow and patched, ragged clothes, looking with their fierce, uncomprehending eyes like wild, bewildered Highland cattle astray in the street; Prussians, overbearing, from the tilt of tall, straight plume to the ring of swaggering heel; English, red-coated and red-faced, and good-natured, almost to sheepishness, in their relations with the townsfolk—all were regarded with the same glances of hatred. But in spite of all, the essential gaiety of the land was paramount. Even Wroth, after none too good a night, a prey to the depression generally attendant on rising with the dawn, could not but feel the sparkle of the atmosphere. The merry bustle around him stirred his mood to hopefulness as he stepped down at last into the street where his horse awaited him, striking an impatient hoof on the stones; where Sebastien Picard stood ready to leap into the curricle and follow his master, whithersoever he went; a discreet furlong in the rear.

The Comte de la Roche-Amand's coach had just started with a splendid clatter of fresh and sturdy horses, and Wroth watched it round the corner, before fully emerging from the door of his inn. Then the spring wind caught him full in the face. A barrow laden with spring flowers buffeted him with fragrance and brightness.

"Monsieur is going to make a beautiful journey," cried the smiling landlord on the doorstep. "To Italy, the beautiful country. I was there with General Bonaparte in '95. It is a land, oh, it is a land to be happy in!"

The words rang in the lover's mind like a peal of bells as he felt his steed move under him; a fresh horse he had also secured and a sound.

As the whole *cortège*—berline in front, horseman in

secret escort, and smartly trotting curricle as rearguard —left the Luxembourg gardens behind and entered the noble chestnut-shaded Avenue de l'Observatoire, Captain Charteris, of the First Guards, and Lieutenant Lord James Murray, of the Gordon Highlanders, were returning to their quarters from their morning gallop in undress.

Charteris reined in and turned to stare after the pale traveller that passed them at such a swinging trot; his comrade unconsciously followed his example.

"Gad, Jim," cried the first, "did you see? That was Wroth on the red roan." He raised a wild halloa, but the red roan hammered unchecked down the long avenue.

The young officer hesitated.

"I'll stake my life it was Wroth. I'm half a mind to be after him. The best company—when he's not in his tempers—in the kingdom. What, have you never heard of Mad Wroth? My dear fellow!"

The red roan was out of sight.

"Oh, hang it," cried Lord James, "I want my coffee."

Count Spiridion had awakened to a remarkable geniality of spirit. This man, who had had so little happiness in life, began to find a charming intimate pleasure in his situation as travelling companion to the one being he loved with all his unsatisfied paternity and all the stifled chivalry of his manhood. The bustle of the early start amused him like a child; and even Juliana's persistent silence could not cast a cloud on the hopeful outlook the morning inspired.

He had a secret smile to himself over her abstracted attitude. "The poor angel wants to be very severe and righteous. She wants to keep anger alive in her

heart. Yet it does not come easy to her to cut herself from him. Eh, *mon Dieu*, they are young, they love each other! Aye, but it is to be hoped my daring Apollo will not show himself too soon, for her own cruelty is pleading his cause with more eloquence than he himself could use." Which reflection reminded Spiridion that he had not yet seen the lover in pursuit this morning. A small anxiety began to grow within him.

"Dear godfather," cried Juliana at last, with a laugh, "what a restless traveller you are! Like yesterday, your head is for ever out of the window."

"You forget, my dear one," said Spiridion, in mild mendacity, "how long I have been exiled from Paris. I can see so much that is new, so much that has been swept away. Ah, now, for example," he cried, as they approached the Barrière Denfert, and the solemn dark façade of the Observatory rose behind the trees, "there is, at last, an old friend whose countenance has not changed, and——"

He broke off and withdrew precipitately from the window; as he did so, pushing Juliana, who was leaning against his shoulder, with very unusual lack of ceremony again into her seat. He had caught a side view of the young man on the roan horse, crossing the wide deserted *place*. The rider's crisp head under the curled brim of his hat and the horse's sleek coat both burned fiery red in a shaft of sunlight.

"My Apollo, aha!" cried the old man exultingly in his heart, and gave a sudden chuckle.

Troyes . . . Dijon . . . Bourg . . .

Wroth could never hear those town-names in later days without a stirring as of fragrance in his heart. The memories of the three successive nights passed in

them, end of the three stages of the rapid journey from Paris to the foot of the mountains, had a pungency of their own, mixed sweet and bitter, like that of some old *pot-pourri*.

The joy of those hours had been so intangible, mere breaths of pleasure and sweetness without the least substantial gratification. And withal the pain of them —the want, the longing, the anxiety, the doubt—had been all the time present. And yet no fulfilled ecstasy could have left such tender hauntings.

At Troyes, strange old mediæval place, stagnant in its dream of past royal grandeur, much the same procedure was followed as in Paris, Wroth putting up at some lesser inn as near as possible to that chosen by Comte Spiridion. But the narrow limits of the town, the evening silence, the sparseness of the people, made the lover feel closer to his lady than in the seething of Paris.

He took seat by his window to watch in patience the façade of the house that sheltered her. Just before the chimes that pulsed incessantly from cathedral towers and church spires had beaten out in fugue the longest hour of the night, across one of the many lighted windows he caught sight of the broad silhouette of Mrs. Panton, passing and re-passing, evidently in attendance, till the shutters were finally closed. There, then, was Juliana's room. He sat nearly till the dawn; his gaze beating upon those closed shutters. A frenzy took him ever and anon, and then a despair; a hot tide of passion and a bitter ebb. Afterwards, he fell into a kind of dream between waking and sleeping, in which visions came to him with such violent rapture that in lassitude followed peace, and, flinging himself dressed upon the bed, he slept dreamlessly for an hour. At sunrise Sebastien, the valet, aroused him as bidden

and the semi-secret chase was resumed. The monotonous lands of Champagne were left behind, and the evening hour saw the travellers spinning through the rich province of Burgundy.

At Dijon, Spiridion and he came face to face in the street. It was a warm, still night, and the air had already something of southern mellowness in its breath. The pavement was wet after a passing spring shower; the gutters were running like little hill-streams. Under a flickering oil lamp the two gazed at each other; for a second the old man's countenance was discomfited. Then it cleared.

"You look very pale, my son," he cried paternally. He took Wroth's fingers in his warm delicate hand. Then: "Ah, how is this," he cried airily, "visiting Dijon? Of course, the English custom. The Grand Tour!"

He made as if he would pass on; but turned back again in haste. "How quickly one advances in immorality!" he exclaimed, between a little laugh and a sigh. "But, my poor child, I could not sleep with this memory of your white face. Understand, I am no accomplice. But I cannot forbid you the high-road, can I?"

He hesitated again; then he went on with a kind of zest, yet hurriedly as if, if crime must be done, "'Twere well 'twere done quickly," "Listen. We never talk about you in that rolling chaise of ours. But, in my heart, I think she knows. *Tenez, milord,*" his words grew ever more low and rapid, "when we reached the bottom of the valley, at Noirecombe, to-day, something took hold of her and she must look out and back on our road. And, so long she looked that my mind misgave me and I popped my old head out of the other

window. And there, sure enough, you were, *sacristi;* on the top of the crest! You and your horse, you might have been cut out in black paper. Then in she draws, and in I draw, and there is long silence between us. Then all at once she looks at me and she says, 'Godfather, have you not noticed that we seem to be followed by a horseman?' Phew! You may think I looked disturbed. Not at all. (See what you are making of me: a positive Machiavel!) 'My dear,' I say to her, 'I was going to remark upon the circumstance myself. I have noticed the traveller with pleasure. In these disturbed days, my daughter, it will be a great protection for us if some gentleman be making the same route as far as Italy. He seems a very discreet person,' I added, 'and keeps his distance with perfect breeding.' At that she says nothing, but she drops her eyes. And I went on—for, you see, how one deceit draws you to another—to expatiate on the increase to our safety. Then she gives a curious little smile, and looks at me again. 'You think that, godfather?' After that no word more."

Wroth stood, his face set in the marble composure which he could assume at times. Spiridion, with his recent insight into the young man's fiery soul, observed admiringly what he considered a display of character *tout à fait Britannique.* His heart was melted within him towards this youth, this unlawful faithfulness, this misery of passion.

"If you want to know my own opinion," he said suddenly, in an agitated whisper, "it is that she knows perfectly well that it is you who are following us, and that she will not pretend to know because she does not want to forbid it."

He nodded two or three times, brushed impetuously past Wroth, and strode up the street with long steps.

But even as he passed he had breathed into the young man's ear:

"To-morrow we push as far as Bourg-en-Bresse."

Spiridion's conscience felt all the weight of this last iniquity as he crossed the threshold of La Cloche. Nevertheless his heart was content within him; and more than once that evening a small, secret smile played about the fine old face.

"You seem happy to-night, godfather," said Juliana, in that half-tender, half-wistful way of speech she had used with him lately.

"My daughter," he said cryptically, "happiness is a rare bird; when it hovers over our path, we must be careful not to scare it."

Juliana folded her lips over the obvious question. Perhaps, as Spiridion said, she was loth to admit that she knew.

CHAPTER XXV

At Bourg, whilom fortress of the Dukes of Savoy, now a sleepy decayed town between the last slope of the Jura and the outlying buttresses of the Alps, there came to the lover for the first time the supreme privilege of spending his night actually under the roof that sheltered his idol. It was impossible to obtain accommodation for himself, his horses and his servant elsewhere; Le Grand Coligny, the posting inn, was the only harbourage available.

He proceeded with infinite precautions. He wished her to be spared the knowledge of his proximity, with some curious delicate desire to help her in that subterfuge of ignorance which, while it fed the flame of his hopes, appealed to his every instinct of chivalry. Therefore he supped in his room, and enjoined upon Sebastien to keep to the stables.

In the silence of that night, under the protective shroud of the darkness, he had a consciousness of her presence, a happiness such as he had only known once before, in the hour of their meeting in the Abbey.

The next stage brought them into the heart of Savoy and the mountain country.

Half-way between Chambéry and St. Jean de Maurienne, Juliana became suddenly aware that the horseman was no longer within his measured distance from her carriage. Ever since the start from Paris she

had felt his company that furlong away, day after day, in every fibre of her being. She knew the very hour that the companionship had fallen away from her and anxiety sat in her heart. At every summit gained she flung a furtive, backward look; always to find the empty road in answer. Spiridion appeared quite unaware, either of the rider's disappearance or of her anxiety. He prattled amiably of the scenery, had reminiscences of his first journey across these mighty passes, rallied Juliana unwontedly upon her abstraction and taciturnity.

For the first time in her life that gentle comradeship irritated her. As the evening began to draw in about them, her heart was gripped by deadly uneasiness. What had happened? Some accident? He was a reckless rider. She could have screamed aloud as La Roche-Amand began to talk with gusto of supper, and of the keen appetite resulting from mountain air. Then an impulse sprang in her to fling herself into the old man's arms and cry out her story, her fears. It was her husband she had driven from her; it was her husband she was flying from. If evil had befallen him, then was she fitly punished. But on the very swing of her thought came another, dashing her back upon herself like a high wave toppling over of its own impetus. What if, after all, Wroth, in one of his moody freaks, had merely abandoned the chase? Surely facts had taught her the uncertainty of his strongest emotions. He had loved her and vowed himself to her in the course of an hour; and before the year was out had made mock of all womanhood and the sacredness of love and bound himself to the first wanton on his path. Only a week ago he had honoured her by the most chivalrous deference; and the next day had insulted her, laid claim to

her with an insolence a man would scarce show a paramour.

Juliana closed her lips then, upon the outcry that rushed to them. Could Spiridion have looked into her heart he would have been startled by the bitter suspicions to which his Juliana, serene, child-natured, trusting, was now giving harbourage. The lesson of Count Cesare, her old husband's cynical betrayal, the ingratitude and treachery of Peggie, had struck her deeper than would have been the case with any one less innocent of the world's ways, less untouched by its evil.

"I have a headache," said she. "Excuse me from supper to-night."

She was standing on the threshold of the quaint bare-boarded room allotted to her, and stretched her forehead for her godfather's kiss with absent air.

"Sweet dreams!" said Spiridion. He went down the creaking wooden stairs with his little chuckle. He had not been in ignorance of Wroth's defection, but attributed it to some very simple cause; it is only lovers who fly to tragic surmises at the first doubt.

The beast that they gave him at the last relay must have cast a shoe, have fallen lame, he thought philosophically. Our young lover will have to ascend on foot, or wait for his curricle, which is always a good length behind. But Juliana is anxious, she is perturbed—she cannot conceal it, dear child—this little accident will not work amiss for our hopes.

"Sweet dreams!"

She looked at the narrow bed and its swelling down pillow with horror. How could she sleep, tossed in alternations of agonising anxiety and black certainty of

distrust? Her window overlooked the entrance yard. How could she leave it before she had seen him ride in, in safety, to the only refuge available in this mountain village?

Mrs. Panton came with a cup of milk, which was all her mistress would touch for supper. A Panton voluble in pessimism as ever. For the first time mistress and maid admitted to each other their knowledge of Wroth's pursuit.

"He's lying in one of them crevices as sure as fate, poor young nobleman! I hope your ladyship is sorry for your hardness of heart."

"The road is as safe as the Lung' Arno," said Juliana, against her own cold apprehension.

"There are no avalanches in Florence and there's many a one falls in the river there," was Panton's double-barrelled consolation.

At midnight Mrs. Panton looked in again; Mr. Picard had arrived with the curricle and his lordship's luggage; but his lordship was nowhere to be seen or heard of.—"The landlord thinks maybe his lordship's horse may be foundered, and he may have put up at some hut, or have left his horse and started by the footway, when as like as not he'll be lost in the snows. Aye, it is a sad strange thing, and Mr. Picard is going to start back at dawn the way he came!"

Upon which pronouncement she retired to her own couch in a pleasurable state of gloomy foreboding.

Juliana wrapped herself in her furs, drew a chair into the window recess, and flung the casement open. The room had grown oppressive with the heat of the stove. As the cold, rarefied air blew in upon her, she inhaled it with a sense of physical relief. It was pure as the virgin ice over which it came. It tingled like champagne. The great stillness, the incomparable

mountain silence, held the outside world; the vault of the sky was lofty, of a magnificent purple; and though she could not see the moon, her radiance lay over everything with a brilliancy that cast shadows on the snow.

The peaks were cut in faint silver outline against the horizon; the nearer ranges shimmering with a fairy sparkle, their valleys holding blue depths. The rush of an unseen torrent ran through the wondrous stillness, without seeming to break it, after Nature's mysterious harmony. She could fancy how its spray leaped to the moonlight, how its green—the jewel-green of snow waters, matched by no other water tint on earth, however splendid—would look in the transforming radiance.

For a while the influence of the scene, the solemn serenity of the hour, raised her from her tormented thoughts. But as the minutes waned, as the half-hour struck and then the hour, misery fell upon her afresh. She began to form inarticulate prayers; visions painted themselves of horrible catastrophe. The grand purity and aloofness of this mountain world became a torture to her human passion. Awhile she was cold, closed her window and hung shivering over her stove; then, suddenly fevered and unbearably restless, hastened again to the casement to watch, to wait. All at once, distinct from the river tumult, into the night silence, there dropped a sound; the sound of footsteps on the road. A clean tread, save where the stones crunched and rolled beneath it.

She knew who it was, even before the lithe figure swung into sight, black-drawn against the white. She drew back; yet she could not bring herself to leave her post. The face of the house was set in darkness, its shadows lay sharply across half the courtyard. She

stood hidden within that gloom, waiting to see his countenance—the end of her long night watch.

Here with the blackness about her, up in the high majesty of the mountain, she was honest: she owned to herself that she hungered for that sight.

He came half-way across the bright side of the courtyard, then halted and flung up his head. She saw his eyes glisten as they scanned the house front; then knew them fixed upon her window. Her heart leaped; she felt as if he had seen her; felt as if, in a long gaze which she was powerless to break, their souls commingled in the old mad way. Yet reason told her that it was a physical impossibility he could distinguish her.

His uplifted face, etherealised in the moonlight, seemed to her, as once before, in the Abbey, like to the face of a conquering angel. It was an entranced instant that they stood, unknowing yet feeling each other, in the night. He was the first to break the spell; starting from his abstraction with the decisiveness characteristic of him to plunge into the shadow of the house. A moment later the sharp summons of his knock upon the inn door rang into the night.

Slowly she closed her window. There had come balm upon her soul; the vision of his face pursued her to the edge of sleep and beyond it into her dreams.

Mrs. Panton found her mistress the next morning in a mood of softness she had not known in her since the old Count's death.

Unrebuked she was allowed to pour forth her tale of his lordship's frightful experiences, as they had reached her through Sebastien. How the horse had fallen dead lame; how the rider had gone off his road to a farm in search of another mount, thus missing Sebastien and the curricle; how he had failed to obtain anything and had been deluded by a herd into venturing upon a

footpath, supposed short cut to the crest of the pass. Here Mrs. Panton waxed extremely picturesque over his lordship's perils, his wanderings when he had lost his way, the utter state of exhaustion in which he had at length reached the inn after tramping from midday.

Juliana had a smile of pleasant mockery, as she recalled the clean, firm tread that had marched upon her hearing, the upright figure that had swung into her vision last night, vigour in every line of it—her strong lover whose single thought on reaching his goal had been to look for her window with piercing eyes!

Up in the snow they were still, cold mists hovering around them born by harsh airs of the snow land; but below, far away, in a streak of stormy April sunset spread the plains of Piedmont.

"Ah, godfather," cried Juliana upon an uncontrollable impulse, reaching her hand to her old companion, "there is Italy! We can be happy there."

The clink of hoofs upon the stone road resounded from the rear as she spoke: Wroth passed the carriage the moment after, at a perilous downward trot. He swept the beaver from his head as he went by.

For a second Spiridion was embarrassed. For the life of him he knew not "what countenance to make." To his relief Juliana broke into a laugh.

"Our escort precedes us now, it seems," she said almost gaily.

"My sight is not what it was," said the old man quickly, "but *Dieu me pardonne*, I almost believe it is milord Wroth!"

He put his head out of the window, as if to make sure. When he turned again to Juliana, ready for the long-denied moment of confession and expansion, she had fallen into her silence again.

These still waters ran to a depth that even his love could not plumb.

From Susa to Turin; from Turin to Florence—three days' traject—the journey proceeded, Wroth still shadowing the carriage with discreet yet constant companionship. Through the ragged flats, the vineyards, the maize-fields—past the misty olives; past the fairy beauty of orchards, past vine again, the maize again, and presently the rice-fields and all the great rolling champaign pregnant with rich promise; then into a country more arid and picturesque, through the lovely Umbrian heights, shadowed with chestnut trees in their young leafage; over their road, endless little historic towns in high, romantic isolation, looking down upon them as they passed.

It was sundown, when the goal of the pilgrimage lay at length before them—Florence, guarded by her cypresses, sentinel on all sides; with her many pinnacles, her one incomparable dome glistening in the ruddy glow; the waters of her river crimson where they ran to the sunset.

At sight of the city, as once before at the sight of the Italian plains, Wroth passed them at his reckless, down-hill trot; and gaze as she might along the dark streets, Juliana could catch no further glimpse of him. For the first time for so many days she had to pass the night without that knowledge of proximity, that singular feeling of being under his guardianship, that had secretly been so sweet to her. As the great gates of the Palazza Mordante in the Ghibellina clanged behind them, it was to her mind as if they were closing upon all her dear, mad hopes. Now that she was at the end of her journey, it seemed as if it was the end of a life.

She was weary; the evening was chill. As she

CHAPTER XXVI

THERE is a salon in the Palazzo Mordante, small in comparison with the state apartments, which has escaped their solemn gloom. It takes a corner and looks from cross windows, one on the narrow street, one over more lowly dwellings towards the white spaces of Santa Croce.

This room had been allotted to La Roche-Amand; and here in the days that followed the arrival in Florence he had spent most of his time. It had been a pleasant and mellow solitude. Here the gentle philosophy of his years had returned to him, displacing the untoward emotions engendered by Juliana's ill-jointed love affairs. It is the privilege of the old to be wisely patient, to be content to await the ripening moment. It is only the young, with so much time before them, who have this precipitation of desire; the young who cannot endure delay, who must gather the bud and drive their teeth into the green fruit.

From his coign apart, Spiridion watched with infinite indulgence the moods of Juliana this first week. To begin with there was an austere, religious mood. Her door was condemned to all but some charitable elderly ladies who formed a league of ultra devotion and good works: a small black circle, disapproving and aloof from the gay world of Florentine society.

Juliana had always been a lavish subscriber to their charities; she now added her personality. What with meetings at each other's houses, discussions, visits to hospitals, the overseeing of old establishments, the founding of new, it was no wonder that she had few moments to spare, even for the old godfather.

Then came the *volte-face*. One morning Juliana ordered the great silver basket of cards to be brought up to her, as she sat for a rare idle half-hour in the corner room. All Florence had called upon her, it seemed, since her return. Among the grand historic names and coronets, there were six cards all bearing the same inscription: "Lord Wroth—Palazzo Bandinelli." It was the seventh day after their arrival.

Juliana laughed a little as she laid the six in a row upon the marble mosaic of the table.

"Every day, the poor boy!" said Spiridion, looking over her shoulder. His eyes were full of gentle amusement and content. These children! It had ceased to seem tragedy to him and had become a *Comédie Sentimentale* after the style of his youth, a comedy of which he could no longer doubt the happy ending. That marriage with the fantastic young lady of the green feathers seemed an infinite absurdity, a contract *pour rire;* there had been no seriousness in it. Without seriousness it must dissolve.

As he stood, smiling upon Wroth's card, a footman entered bearing another on a salver. Juliana glanced at it.

"Have you denied me?" she asked.

"*Ma* . . . !" Your Italian is quick of intuition. Giovanni's elbows flew to his ears, he grinned deprecatingly: "These were her Excellency's orders."

"Yes, true. Go, go," said Juliana impatiently.

She added the new card to the row with musing precision.

"It is the first time he has called so early," she said, dreamily.

"Child," said Spiridion, with some impatience, "you cannot for ever refuse to see him."

"I am not going to refuse any more," said she abruptly, "him or any one else. We'll throw the salons open, *mon parrain*. We shall have a feast with music; you shall play for us; let it be for to-night. Battista has but to go round—he'll be charmed with the task." She bundled the cards back into the basket. "I go to confer with Battista."

She nodded to Spiridion from the door. The severe beauty of her face was softened by an air of wonderful, youthful gaiety.

"I do not know my Juliana any more. I do not know her any more, faith!" said Spiridion, shaking his head. "I cannot imagine what she means to do. And the young man who has never even been to see me—well, well, all is sure to come right."

Meanwhile he had to practise, if he was to do his Juliana honour at such abrupt notice. The decision was over-sudden for his gently-moving age. Yet, to see her smile as she had smiled just now . . . it was worth far greater sacrifice!

The morning after Juliana's reception Spiridion sat once more in his little room, an open letter on the table before him. Good old man, he had seldom found himself in so singular a frame of mind, torn between conscience and inclination, between the dictates of a reasoned benevolence and the impulses of his heart.

The letter was from the Curé at Compiègne, indited at Madame Thomas' request to narrate the story of

Miladi Wroth's seizure, and of her present condition of weakness. "I believe the poor lady to be very ill," wrote the Curé, "but the doctor thinks she may recover, though the chest will always be in danger."

That she would die—this gaudy butterfly, who had fluttered so irresponsibly across the lives of the two he loved—what solution, thought Spiridion, could be more simple, more satisfactory, more desirable? It was against this practical thought that conscience rebelled in vain: it re-appeared in the wake of every new reflection. The party had left upon him a vague sense of uneasiness. Juliana had looked beautiful and the throng had been brilliant. The music had been academic enough, and his own contributions (he flattered himself) had been appreciated. But there were three or four things that puzzled and haunted him.

Imprimis, Milord's attitude. Wroth, man of the world, urbane, airy, discussing indifferent things with indifferent airs, was a hitherto unknown personality; there had been no trace of the impassioned lover, no trace of the romantic *beau ténébreux*, left in him last night, nothing of the man of single passion and single thought, whom Spiridion knew and had grown to love. The new Wroth Spiridion mistrusted. He was hurt, too, that towards himself there had been the same aloofness, the same mere social courtesy as towards all others. Yet twice or thrice he had caught, or fancied to catch, some strange looks cast by the young Englishman upon the group about Juliana.

And here came the second cause for anxiety. She had been very much surrounded—as indeed was to be expected. And the attentions of two or three

of the most brilliant young representatives of great Tuscan houses had been unmistakably marked. One goes quick in these matters under the skies of Florence; and where the prize is so rarely precious, the race for it can scarce be soon enough entered on, in the simple minds of her sons.

Juliana's manner, it is true, had been, as usual, queenly and detached; but, as hostess, she was bound to be gracious to all. Spiridion saw that Wroth had no word in private with her, except some parting phrase, as he bent to kiss her hand. What that phrase was the old gentleman had no conception; but a silence had come over her from that moment. Decidedly the news of that poor inconvenient creature's death, if it was to be, could not come an hour too soon.

Fresh anxiety there was, then, weighing upon Spiridion's good heart that morning, together with a sense of guilt connected with his own unholy desires. Yet the very atmosphere about him irresistibly inspired other sensations; a kind of reckless confidence that all must be for the best in a world where the sky was so blue, the sunshine so tangible. He wandered to the window recess, mounted its step, and stood looking out through the depth of wall over the low roofs to where Santa Croce blazed in white splendour. He held a glass of the yellow wine from the paunched *fiaschone* on the breakfast table and sipped it absently.

On the steps of the church a flower woman had installed her wares. Roses and irises were pink and mauve against the marble, carnations glowed like sunset glamour. Her umbrella was green, her kerchief orange; what a captivating city it was! Through the open casement the rumour of the town filled his

ears; his old soul wandered out happily into the spring air; he did not hear lackey Giovannino's knock, nor note his entrance till the panting voice was in his ear: Her Excellency demanded his Excellency's presence immediately in her apartment.

Spiridion started. Through all his optimism the sense of impending event had hung over him all these days. The boy's face, he thought, was charged with importance. He set down his glass, paused a second by the table in hesitation over the open letter, then thrust it into his breast and hastened after the messenger.

Giovannino clattered down the stone stairs, padded across the great shining gallery with accustomed sureness, and flung open one of the panelled doors with a flourish.

As Spiridion approached, he heard Juliana's voice cry out from the room: "I receive no one to-day. Understand? No one." He found her pacing up and down, very pale, her eyes aflame; the folds of her grey silk dress rustled and rippled and scolded with each angry step.

Upon his entrance she halted, wheeled round upon him, and stood looking at him, the fine wings of her nostrils flickering with her hurried breath.

"Heavens, how beautiful she is, and how terrible!" thought the old man.

"You sent for me, my daughter," he stammered, as if he had been the culprit. "Something has happened——"

"Yes, something has happened," she answered with a short, fierce laugh, her voice vibrating on strings of passion. "Sit down, godfather. Yes, something has happened." Again she took a stormy turn and halted. "Lord Wroth, the man who professed to love me, he

has shamed me in the eyes of all Florence. The town is ringing with my name and his."

"Just heaven!" cried Spiridion in utter blankness of astonishment.

"You saw him last night," she went on.—"I might have known. Did you watch him, godfather? I might have known, under his air of quiet, his charming social manner, there was the wild beast ready to spring. I caught his eye once or twice. It had the glare of his own wolf in the dark Abbey. He kissed my hand as he said good-bye. It was no kiss—it was as savage as a bite. Do you know what he said to me? 'You are mine, mine, mine!' In French it cannot sound to you as it does in English. I loved him——" Her voice suddenly trailed off, veiled, softened by rising tears, but she fought them back, burning them away with a fresh flame. "I would not have that love—that love is insult to me. I might be his mistress, as all Florence thinks me to-day——"

"In the name of heaven," cried Spiridion shrilly, "what has he done?"

"What has he done? Five of my friends, oh, my dearest friends! have been with me this morning with the story of what he has done. Go out in the streets, you will find my name bandied about in every corner. It seems the Marchese Canovai kissed my hand twice in farewell last night. It seems that young Prince Liechtenstein placed his hand on the back of my chair during your music. It seems that Florio Settignani, whom I have known all my life, called me Juliana. Lord Wroth lay in wait for each one as he went away from the house, met each one in succession this morning, and has left a bullet in each one's shoulder . . . at exactly the same spot!"

The rare sound of an oath fell from Spiridion's lips

(no worse one indeed than *Ventre-Saint-Gris*); it expressed intense astonishment, but at the same time an irrepressible admiration.

"This is phenomenal," cried the old aristocrat. "Three in one morning—shades of *Bassompière*! —each at the same spot. What a shot the scamp must be!"

"You do not understand," cried Juliana storming. "My name! my name has been used!"

"It is true," said Spiridion, reflectively, "these three very gentlemen are indeed already reputed to be aspirants for your hand."

"But is it not that what I am telling you?" she fulminated, and indignation went from her like the breath of the tempest. "I am his! He has blazoned it abroad, and no one must dare come near me! I am his property! You know the tongue of Florence? You know how even the most rigid lives here are food for gossip? Conceive what I am thought of now! Does he think to force me thus? Oh, my instinct was a true one." She flung both hands over her bosom as if guarding its treasures. "I knew his love was no right love!"

Into Spiridion's withered cheek crept all at once the sullen red. Another aspect of the situation presented itself. His Juliana smirched! Her good name attacked! The sweet sanctity of her life desecrated! She was right, this was infamous betrayal, the young man's undisciplined passion had led him into the grossest outrage. But, worse than all, there was that deadly grain of truth about the position without which no lie can live.

Wroth, a married man, had followed Juliana from England to France, from France to Italy. And though Juliana had had moments of righteous rebellion,

she had subtly encouraged, tacitly admitted. And, woe for Spiridion, he had been accomplice and abettor! He gave a groan, and dropped his head into his hands.

"My poor child—what a disaster!"

Then he was minded of the letter in his pocket. The solution! In his antique, conventional code of ethics, marriage repairs everything. This augur of freedom for both, he now thought, might do something to soothe the hurt pride of his poor child. So far can the most sympathetic mistake the mind of the one he loves best!

"Read that," he murmured, and tendered the sheet with averted eyes.

She took it impatiently; went to the window with it. Then he heard her laugh and, glancing up, saw her coming towards him again, dropping the letter from her touch.

"Do you think I want her to die? Do you think that that would make a difference?"

Her voice was weary with the uttermost disdain; all fire had gone out of it. She let herself fall upon the great couch that ran at the foot of the carved and painted Florentine bed. She looked up at the smiling face of her dead husband and cold visions came upon her of that smile as she had last seen it, when, set in immovable irony, it had seemed to mock her youth and hope. Life so base a thing, and death the end of all! The last sting of the wasp.

And Spiridion was chiding himself; knowing her noble nature, how could he have thought to console her with such hope as this?

"*Hélas*," he cried, "I am punished! The wrong seemed almost right. But wrong is never right. We both did wrong, my daughter, and I the greater: for

you rose from your weakness and tried to fly. Whereas I——" He broke off. "I was most to blame, and cruelly we are punished." He thought of the duel out of which he had been cajoled. Whatever the issue might have been it must have placed a barrier between Wroth and Juliana. He thought with deep repentance of his yearning to the culprit, his secret aid, his deliberate dallying with the irregular situation.

"We are punished where we sinned," he cried again. "Neither you nor I, my daughter, are of those who stoop to sin; but we were frail through our affection."

He broke off suddenly. Juliana had straightened herself among the cushions and was fixing him with a glance of such anger that the purple of her pansy eyes seemed black. The olive of her cheek had turned death-white.

"What do you take me for?" she panted.

A second he stared, bewildered; then, still uncomprehending, perceived only that he had hurt her, and hurried to her side, full of the tenderest apology. But she flung herself from his touch.

"Only leave me!"

Sighing profoundly, feeling that the best of women must remain enigmas to the masculine mind, he withdrew in deep perplexity and distress to his apartment, to cogitate upon the course now to be pursued. Something must be done, that was urgent. Juliana's fair fame must not be left at the mercy of her mad lover.

CHAPTER XXVII

As Spiridion was attiring himself in his most precise fashion, it became clear to him that there was very little choice of action for him. Only two or three things could be done. The seeking out of a few Florentine notabilities, and some discreet conversation anent the eccentric Englishman's infatuation—that must be his first move. A little straining of the truth would have to be tolerated here and there for the complete vindication of the Contessa Mordante's fair fame. But there would be scant deception in the asseveration that Juliana had given no encouragement here to the frenzied youth, unless the inclusion of him among her guests could be so considered. (He mentally rehearsed the gesture with which he would tap his forehead, dilating upon the proverbial Britannic madness.) He must, of course, make light of the matter, as far as it affected Juliana.

He might be believed, or he might not; something of his conversation, at any rate, would remain. And Italy is the country where the insanities of love are most easily understood and condoned. This tiresome round accomplished—club, casino, café, salons—he would next seek the sinner himself. Stern grew his brow upon that project. This time the offence had been unpardonable.

He found Wroth magnificently installed in the

piano nobile of the well-known Cardinal's palace on the left bank, the present owners of which had been but too delighted to receive as tenant so notable and wealthy a lord. The windows overlooked the swirling race of the Arno between the two historic bridges; glancing down stream there was the sun setting blood-red over the weir; glancing up there were the high hills already purpling against an austere sky.

The note of the cypress pointed the evening in that eastward view with indescribable solemn emphasis, so late was it already by the time the old count had finished his diplomatic peregrination. He could not feel that, with all his airy tact and persuasion, he had carried much conviction. Florence so much preferred to entertain its own picturesque version; it was too openly delighted with a scandal of such freshness and romance. In one salon Spiridion was teased about his championship, amiably bantered. "Ta-ta-ta—tell that elsewhere, *caro!*" In another house, where one of the wounded was a close connection, he was not allowed to place a word in edgeways between torrents of abuse of the mad Englishman. Such an one was a danger to the world at large, and ought to be shut up. The grand ducal authorities should be invoked. As for la Mordante! Oh, la Mordante would have done better to remain in England with her lunatic! The idea of going over all that way to fetch him and let him loose upon us!

In fact La Roche-Amand entered the Palace with a lurking suspicion that he had done more harm than good, as is generally the result with such well-intentioned meddling. It did not tend to make him any the more affably disposed for his interview. This time he sat down; there could be no question of his adding the supreme absurdity of another challenge to the

situation. But he waved Wroth's hand away with an irritable gesture. He was tired, dispirited, avowedly cross.

Wroth had sprung to meet him with a buoyant step, a light in his eye, a glow in his pale cheek. The old man was in no mood for these young Apollo airs.

"You have but one thing to do, milord," he began abruptly, "it is to pack up and depart."

"I?" said Wroth.

He stood with his back against a round marble table, inlaid with the inevitable Florentine mosaic, leaning on it with both hands. "I?" he repeated, and tossed back his head with a laugh.

"You, you and no other," growled Spiridion, "unless you wish the grand-ducal police to undertake your removal. A pretty business you've made of it, young sir; a pretty return for my confidence! The lady whose name you have dared to take as a pretext for your odious bullying is gravely incensed. You have had mad hopes, Lord Wroth, resting on the most equivocal foundation. But such as they were, you have madly destroyed them. To be gone out of this place is now the only reparation which, as a *galant homme*, you can offer."

The set mask of impassivity had fallen on the young man's face during this severe indictment. He glanced down, and there was a lengthy silence.

"I have touched him to the heart," thought Spiridion, and instantly began to feel a relenting.

Suddenly Wroth swung himself backwards to a seat on the table, caught up one knee and clasped it with both hands. Then he shot a full glance at his mentor. The look, the movements, were instinct with boyish spirit.

"But, my most dear Count," he cried, "this is on the contrary the very moment when I must remain in Florence. Oh, is Juliana angry with me? Do you know, I don't think I mind that. Anything rather than her pretence of indifference. Now, my dear, dear, excellent friend! (What you're not my friend? Well, I'm yours to the death, anyhow!) What's all this to-do about a simple matter? Yes, it is a simple matter if you'll only understand it, the simplest in the world. I love Juliana. She loves me—pray let me speak—she loves me and you know it. Let two men utter the naked truth for once. Ours is a love, rare, simple, complete. Only for that empty convention of a marriage (which is no marriage) against us, we should be together—a union so glorious that the world has held but few such before! Antony and Cleopatra, Paolo and Francesca, Romeo and Juliet—two that must come together in spite of God and man. Well, what have I done? I am letting Florence know that she is mine. Is that so heinous in your eyes?"

Spiridion tried in vain to stem the flood of words. His first protests had been indignant. At last it was with an unwilling laugh that he flung out both his hands.

"For heaven's sake! But you are mad, *fou furieux*, my poor boy."

"Mad?" echoed the other. He sprang up from the table to cast himself on a stool close to his visitor. "Mad? Nay not mad, but a great deal more sane than all you folk who go hemmed in and bound by the wretched tape of convention. Look at it, for once, with the eyes of a man—without the social glasses. I must wait before I can marry Juliana, true, but she is mine already for all that; and I shall exercise my

right to protect her from popinjays, presumptuous fools, and conquering bullies. It is my right to protect her, and I will."

"Protect her!" ejaculated Spiridion, driven free of his last shred of prudence; "but, good God, man, all Florence has it to-day that you are her lover!"

"Her lover!" echoed Wroth. A wave of emotion swept over him, dyeing his face and ebbing away to leave it paler than before. Radiance seemed indescribably to transfuse itself about him, as if some inner lamp had been kindled. "Her lover! And am I not her lover?" he cried, and fell into a deep muse.

"My faith, a fanatic! . . . As good try and reason with him as with a dervish!" Yet the wonted spell was working upon the old man's sensibilities: the spell of the youth, the beauty, the passion itself, with its ruthlessness and single-mindedness.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he said to himself, "we have the poet who is mad on his conception, the musician who is mad on his harmonies, and here, for once, there is a lover whose love is like genius itself, an absorbing flame colouring his every thought. . . . It burns all before it, listens to no reason, but, heaven forgive me, in that godlike frame how beautiful it seems to my old eyes!" He put out his withered hand and touched the shapely clasped fingers close to him. "Listen," he said coaxingly, "believe me I understand far more than you think. But after all this is a world of conventions; they must be conciliated from time to time. You've been—yes, yes, I must say it—you've been insanely rash, young man. Make the little sacrifice for her sake. Go away for a while until this is blown over. It will be for her peace, for her good name; and then later we can combine some plan—we shall see."

What of La Roche-Amand's stern resolve? What of his wrath? Here was he, temporising again; sympathising—nay plotting.

"When you have heard from your lawyer——" he resumed. This point brought back the memory of the Curé's letter. It was a powerful argument for the discretion of absence and delay. "By the way," he cried, bringing out the sheet in triumph, "read that, *mon jeune ami*, and learn that your deliverance is probably nearer than you anticipate."

Wroth started from his abstraction. It had seemed as if he had heard very little of the old gentleman's discourse. But the word deliverance aroused him; he took the letter, glanced at it, first vaguely, then with a kind of surprise; then finally, much as Juliana had done, he dropped it from his touch, with repulsion.

"I do not wish to hear or know anything of that creature again!"

"But I tell you she is dying!" shouted Spiridion, despairingly.

"She—die?" cried Wroth, turning a savage eye upon him. "Such as she never die. Do you not know that?"

La Roche-Amand picked up his letter without another word. One and the other, Juliana and Wroth, they were equally unreasonable, equally incomprehensible. He was at his wit's end how to deal with them.

"But you will leave Florence, leave to-night, even for a few days," he pleaded almost tearfully at last.

"I?" cried Wroth again, leaping round upon him, with a return of his first manner. "I? Beloved adopted father, I have another little meeting to-morrow morning, and"—as upon a sudden delighted inspiration—

"the fellows at the Embassy tell me they dare not support me any more. You, therefore, shall be my second."

Spiridion started on his chair. He choked.

"What! Another? This is too much!"

"Wait a minute, till you hear," said Wroth. His face grew suddenly black. He laid his hand on Spiridion's knee; it had so great a weight of wrath that the old man could neither shake it off nor rise. "Yesterday, one of Liechtenstein's seconds, a Florentine dog, said after our business: 'You give yourself a great deal of trouble, milord. Do you think it worth while?' 'Evidently,' I said. 'The old wasp himself was not so particular,' he said then and laughed; he added something about old husbands and young wives—something he had not time to finish for my glove caught him on his foul mouth—and it is to be swords to-morrow, since the blow gives him the choice of weapons," continued Wroth, with an abrupt change of manner. "But I'm not going to be content with winging him like these others."

He yawned and stretched himself, showing his white teeth like some splendid young animal playing with his own vigour.

Spiridion, who had been staring at him, bewildered, scarcely able, with the wearied mind of the old, to follow him in his various moods, felt a stab of apprehension at his heart. So full of life, so sure of himself, so audacious in his defiance of fortune. . . !

"Ah, *mon enfant*," he exclaimed, "never boast! I have seen many a meeting in my day, and how many have I not seen where your man who went out to kill was himself brought home!"

Wroth snapped his teeth together at the end of a second yawn.

"Must he not be killed, then, that blasphemer?"

"'Tis a Florentine: nothing is sacred to them!—and it is you who have set tongues wagging."

"Then I'll silence them," said Wroth.

As Spiridion went slowly and wearily home, the image of the young man in his arrogance of health and nerve and beauty, his defiance of the whole world, his reckless indifference to danger, haunted him with ever-increasing melancholy. He had accepted the responsibility of acting as second; indeed, he could not have endured to let Wroth go out to this meeting without what little protection his presence, his age, his experience, his moderation could give him. But boding was upon him. Was this to be the end of it all—the solution?

CHAPTER XXVIII

"JULIANA, I have had bad tidings for you."

Juliana stared at Spiridion a second with uncomprehending eyes; then she looked down again upon the spring flowers she was sorting, picked up a heavy-headed rose and settled it in the vase before her. Spiridion caught the moving hand between his.

"My child," he began again, "you must listen to me. . . . There has been another duel this morning."

She opened her wide gaze upon him, suddenly noting the grey pallor of his face, the trembling of his lip. She rose from her chair with a single movement.

"He is dead!"

"No—badly wounded."

"I will go to him."

It was what he had come to ask her to do; but her look, her toneless voice, the fashion with which she blindly pushed him on one side and rushed to the door robbed him of speech. She did not hesitate a second nor stop to snatch cloak or veil, but into the street she went with an incredibly straight, swift step; passed with the same unseeing eyes the coach that Spiridion had left in waiting, and took unfalteringly the most direct lane for the riverside.

The coachman turned to stare and call after her and then hailed his grey-headed employer, as the latter came hurrying forth in his turn with shaken speed.

"Useless!" signalled Spiridion. He broke into an uneven run and caught up Juliana as turning the corner she crossed from the narrow sheltered alleys into the blaze of sunshine and airy spaces of the quays. He took her hand, still trotting by her side, and she let it lie in his like a child.

Many turned to look after them. Some stood still to watch and comment; some even followed curiously —the wonderful pale lady, with her fixed eyes, and the old gentleman, half running to keep up with her strong swinging pace, both bareheaded in the sun-beaten street; he, with agitated face working as he talked; she, silent, not even turning her head.

Spiridion never knew whether Juliana heard one word of what he said to her during that short, terrible way. But, out of his over-charged heart, he had to speak, first in faltering attempts at comfort, then in explanation.

"It is not hopeless, my daughter, now that the bleeding has been stopped. True, it is a bad wound. But he is young—ah, and admirably strong! So long as this bleeding does not begin again. . . . He asked for you, insisting—the surgeon was anxious you should come at once. . . . But, there—there, I am a fool, a clumsy old fool to let you think so much of it! Such young wild cats have forty lives! So long as he is not agitated—that is very important, very important, you understand. He must not be thwarted—no shock, ah, that is all important! He must be soothed. . . . Soothe him, all will be right. No question of prudishness this morning—my poor little one—life is at stake. . . . Thank God we are in sight of the Palace!" They had crossed the Ponte Vecchio and were once more hastening down the river bank. "A few yards, my Juliana (God, God, what a morning it has been!) I

was his second, you know; you will blame me? Alas! my only desire was to do all I could for him—the duel had to be. Heavens, nothing could have kept those two apart! Wroth had struck him . . . that Aldobrandini who had spoken lightly of you, struck him on the mouth; and the Florentine came on the ground in a state of hatred such as I, who have seen many meetings, have never beheld in a morning combat before. They meant to kill each other. The night had been all too long awaiting the moment. Positively we seconds were of no use. . . . I could not tell you how it happened—such inveteracy! Our Wroth was the cooler of the two, but none the less fierce; the other—for all his repute as a blade—became like a madman the instant they joined steel. He was for ever closing—and the whole thing so quick that before we had time to exclaim it was over. . . . Wroth drew the first blood: Aldobrandini, in his rage, never felt the wound—so he said, at least. How it may be, I know not; but even as Wroth, seeing the red on his opponent's shirt, dropped his own point loyally . . . the other sprang for the opening. Eh, my God, had I been younger and quicker! . . . I ought not to have been second, I am too old. . . . Ah, the door, at last—now gently, remember, my little Juliana, gently!"

With the same singleness of intention that had held her ever since she had received the news, Juliana saw but one thing in the pompous bedchamber: Wroth's livid head upon the pillow.

He was stretched on the little camp bed which he had from the first ordered for his use instead of the monstrous canopied edifice proper to the room.

They had settled him low on account of the recurrent faintness, and he lay motionless, with upturned face; but as Juliana bent over him, he opened his

eyes and there was triumphant life in them. Her heart, which had stopped, started beating wildly again. He had seemed so still, set in a beauty terrible like that of death.

She hung over him a moment or two before speaking, gazing into his gaze. The surgeon, a harsh-looking elderly Austrian of military bearing, watched her with angry intentness. His patient's existence hung in the balance; women were proverbially fools —and at the first display of emotion he was ready to eject her. Sebastian Picard sniffed audibly. Spiridion drew back into the shadows, averting his eyes—how could he watch his poor children at such a moment? The unconscious tears were running down his cheek.

She knew nothing of these presences—she was alone in all the world with him.

"Wroth, beloved——"

A transient smile came to his lips.

"All is very well, then." He spoke no louder than a whisper, but with extraordinary clearness. He lay silent a second, gathering his forces with indomitable will. Then came the clear-breathed words again, "I will live."

"Oh, my dearest—yes, you must live for me!"

The smile returned—leaped to his eyes.

"You know what you owe me?"

Her heart melted over him like a mother's; the merest flicker of life in him; these exhausted veins, and the old perverse spirit untamed! She bent to his forehead; but something drew her—not the languid hand he could not lift, but the fierce purpose within him—to his lips. A moment it was as if the life she yearned to give him were leaving her for him. Then he sighed; his lips grew cold beneath hers. She

straightened herself and flung a terrible look round the room.

"He is dead!"

Already the surgeon had sprung to the bed. Spiridion caught Juliana in his arms; he, too, thought it was the end.

"Take her away," cried the surgeon, in an angry rasping voice. "What did I say? No, no, he is not dead, but he will be so to-night, if we have more of this. (You, my friend, instead of snivelling there, bring over that phial.) Take her away, I say!"

They were in the salon, the double doors closed between them and the sick man's room. The whole place was still filled for Spiridion with that glory of youth and strength he had beheld there over night; his heart was stabbed by the memory of the inert figure within, the countenance set in death-like quietude. Never would he forget the vision of those two faces close to each other, as white one as the other. He recalled the day when they had met—radiant in spring vitality—in the sunshine of his park, and he had watched the blood leave their cheeks.

His poor children. His heart lamented with the ever repeated cry.

"*Ah, mes pauvres enfants!*" he ejaculated, letting himself fall weakly into a chair.

Juliana started from her stony trouble. She turned and looked at Spiridion and her lip began to quiver.

"I am his wife! I am his wife, and I cannot tell him! I am his wife! If I tell him now he will die. He will die and never know it!"

For one moment Spiridion thought the shock had turned her brain.

"Juliana—Juliana!"

"I am his wife!" she cried on a yet more piercing note.

"Juliana—my child!"

She struck her breast fiercely where the wedding ring lay hidden. "I have his blood upon my soul. The blood of the man I love." Her anguish rose with every word. "I loved him and I have murdered him. My husband—and I dare not tell him! O godfather, our first kiss is our death kiss!"

Falling on her knees beside him, she flung herself into his kind arms. It was as if he held passion, grief incarnate. Sobs tore her; the tears streamed. His heart was bleeding for her, his mind bewildered to confusion.

"But Juliana—but, my little Juliana!" . . . He could find nothing to say, nothing to do for her but to hold her close.

Juliana Wroth's wife! On the face of it, the thing was incredible. Yet, as he enfolded her, the conviction was borne in on him that the incredible was true.

By and by, when the storm had of its own violence exhausted itself, she told him her story; the singular, inexplicable story; the most inexplicable side of it all her own persistent holding of her secret to such complication, misery, and final tragedy.

"But, heaven be good to me!" he exclaimed irrepressively, "since you loved him, since he loved you?"

The blood rushed to her face.

"I feared his love—I doubted it . . . I resented it!" The last words were scarcely distinguishable, but the old man, bending, caught them.

"Resented?"

"Oh, godfather, do not torture me!" She turned her face against his breast. "I could not endure he should love me—so lawlessly—as a man loves a mistress."

Spiridion sat silent for a moment or so, then he laid his hand on the dark hair.

"Eh, my daughter," he said simply. "What a mistake! Since it was no wrong in you to love him, since it was your duty even, you should, on the contrary, have given much and generously and without hesitation. See, child—where it is permitted, never fear love, never fear to love. By love alone is love sanctified. With each step apart you took in your pride you have pushed him down to a lower step of passion and resolve."

He suddenly checked himself as her head drooped upon his knees. She lay like a majestic flower, beaten down by the gale, drenched by the tempest rain. Fate had avenged itself upon her, as it does upon all those who play with great issues and elemental passions for some lesser stake of their own.

Juliana and Spiridion lingered in the Palace; the day drew to its close, and yet they were not re-admitted to the sick room. Spiridion's attempt to re-enter it had been met by the surgeon with almost brutal rebuff.

"The bleeding has broken out three times already; if it happens a fourth time, it is good-bye. No more of this sentimental nonsense, these emotions, these embraces. She was all but the death of him, I tell you. I'll not have her near him again, nor you either."

"You do not quite understand how it is between them," began La Roche-Amand, with his painstaking courtesy; but the other interrupted, overbearing.

"I understand that I have got the finest bit of

anatomy I have ever handled to keep the life in—and I mean to keep the life in it. Good day to you, Monsieur le Comte."

And before the inexorably closing door Spiridion had no choice but to retire.

The long, long hours through, from burning midday to the creeping of purple shadows, he sat with the stricken woman and scarcely a word passed between them. After her outburst, Juliana's silence had fallen upon her, charged this time with the bitterest knowledge that can enter woman's soul; she had injured the man she loved. Hers never was a hopeful nature; there was no ray of light on her horizon; she saw nothing before her but Wroth's death.

To Spiridion, however—incorrigible old sentimentalist!—as the moments went by they brought an ever-increasing conviction that the tangled affairs were beginning to be straightened out, that the young man must live, since Juliana was his wife. Inconsequent optimism! God (thought this man who had been himself horribly robbed of all he loved) would not permit these two poor hearts to be parted now. That kiss of Juliana's should prove life to her lover. Her presence would be of more help to him than potion or bandage. Let her be his nurse, and the moment would soon come when he would be strong enough to hear the wonderful truth. Yonder rough Austrian, who spoke of the young man's anatomy, what indeed did he understand of such a lover? It was the flesh he reckoned with, not the spirit.

It was quite evening when Sebastian appeared at length with a summons for the Count to his master's side.

"I shall come back to fetch you, my daughter," cried Spiridion in triumph, and went hastily.

On the threshold of the bedroom the surgeon met him.

"He is better. He has asked for you. I give you five minutes," drawing his watch. "If you agitate him, his blood be on your head!"

The imperious, harsh voice started mingled resentment and apprehension in La Roche-Amand's mind as he passed silently into the room.

"By my faith, he speaks to me," thought the old aristocrat, "as if I were one of his 'Kaiserlick' troopers. And, eh, *mon Dieu*, how shall it be given to me to keep this wild boy from agitation?"

But in the shaded light Wroth lay in a great placidity. Spiridion discovered that he had not been sent for to talk, but to listen. There were faint signs of increasing strength about the wounded man. He slowly turned his head at Spiridion's approach. The smile on the lip, the triumph of life in the eyes were more distinctly present than before, showed in more singular contrast to the bloodlessness of the face. His voice was a shade more human, less of a mere ghostly whisper.

He took scarce one of his allotted five minutes to say his say; and when it was said it filled his hearer with amazement not unmixed with admiration.

"Bend to me close—that is well. Is she here? Take her home with you. I am going to live. When I am strong I shall come for her. Till then I will not see her. Have you understood? Make her understand."

The eyes that had held Spiridion now released him. The slight tension of the prostrate frame relaxed, but the white lips still moved. Spiridion stooped anxiously to listen till he realised that the words were not for him.

"In the wings of her black hair there are hidden violets. Black hair has my beloved—purple eyes . . ."

The old man drew away quickly, in terror of the prohibited agitation. But if Wroth was wandering, it was in pleasant fields; a serenity, almost a joyfulness, was on his face.

"And there he lies and plans, at death's gates, oblivious of that other to whom he believes himself shackled. What a character; good heavens, the dear scamp; what audacity, what a will and what a love!"

Juliana returned to the Palazzo Mordante unresistingly. She made no comment upon the Comte's account of his visit and Wroth's message; she folded herself in her great silence as in a mantle. But when they came into the room where the flowers lay as she had dropped them that morning, and the pungent, sweet scent of them rose to her nostrils, she turned livid.

"No, I'm not going to faint," she cried, as both her godfather and Panton hurried to her, "only take the lilies away."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE late spring had deepened into early summer over the city of lilies and roses, and the air was full, almost to over-sweetness, of the breath of the iris. Roses foamed over the walls, ran riot in the gardens, scattered themselves on every quick breeze. Everything in the world, as bounded by those low hills, had gained colour, richness, perfume. The skies were solid blue, the very shadows permeated with sunshine. The heats were earlier than usual; and Florence—the gay, social scandal-mongering, gossiping, easy-moralled and kind-tempered—was scampering off to its villas or to the sea-board, to Paris, to Switzerland or Vienna. In the Palazzo Mordante there were constant preparations for departure, but the moment was ever delayed. There was a feeling of expectation, of waiting, in the whole atmosphere of the place.

"And when does your ladyship intend to tell the poor young nobleman that you are his lawful wife?" was Mrs. Panton's daily inquiry to her mistress, with the variants: "How you can reconcile it with your conscience to let other people have the nursing of him, seeing it is your right and dooty?" or "What's keeping your ladyship from his lordship? What does the surgeon know about it then?" "How long does your ladyship mean to uphold this poor kind of game? It's nice tales they're tattling of us—I can

let your ladyship know. And that wretched Peggie gettin' well there, at Munrepo, all under false pretences. Wicked, I call it, my lady! What did I say from the beginning?"

Juliana was very gentle with her irate old nurse; opened her heart more to her, upon some odd twist of reserve, than to Spiridion, with all his delicate refinement of imagination.

"O Panton, dear!—I am not to go to him till he sends for me; I must not dare to tell him yet, he has been so ill! Not till the wound is quite healed, Panton."

And there then came the days of hidden feasts at the Palazzo Mordante, where Spiridion, the daily go-between, brought such snippets of news as: "This morning, the wing of a chicken and a mouthful of wine," or "To-day our scamp is to sit by the window," or yet "To-day we are to be wheeled upon the terrace. We make progress, my daughter, such progress!—Inconceivable!"

With every such step Juliana bloomed into brighter beauty; she who had looked womanly even in her girlish years, now began to have about her a nameless, shy grace, an exquisite re-blossoming of virginal youth, before the promise of the hour.

The last spring flowers were dead; to the end of her days the odour of lilies would sicken her in memory; but with the breath of the roses would linger her tenderest hauntings.

She wore a bunch of dark-red roses in the bosom of her filmy black muslin gown; its delicate folds were gathered to her waist with purple ribbon. Her youth, her beauty, her glorious whiteness of skin, the night richness of her hair, the purple of her eyes,

radiated from the cloudy setting, in so many notes of colour.

Spiridion gallantly shaded his eyes with his hand.

"A vision!" he cried, as he stood on the threshold, beaming upon her. His own countenance was beautiful with good tidings. "We are ordered to the hills and to the fresh air, and I am commissioned to find a suitable villa!" he cried; "and *subito*, as they say here! The doctor (I have taken quite a liking to the monster) would prefer it to be to-morrow if possible. It's quick march with him, now, the martinet! But where——?"

Juliana's eyes, which never sparkled nor flashed, but took to themselves deeper hues in moments of emotion, grew dark now. Spiridion took a seat beside her and gathered her long ivory hand in his. She drew it from him and he saw a light shudder pass through her.

"Take him to Torre di Montemuscoli," she said after a pause.

"Juliana! . . ."

"Let him go to Montemuscoli. He does not know it is mine—yet. It stands so high, it is healthy and so cool, the view is so vast! All is ready there, all is waiting for us. The new wing on the garden, over the terraces, is prepared for the summer—the gardens, the gardens are in bloom——"

She spoke rapidly, her lids cast down over the tell-tale deepening of her eyes.

Spiridion sat looking at her and forgot to speak, so many conflicting feelings were in his mind: surprise, sympathy—that sadness which the old must ever feel at the sight of young joy; sadness too that she would so soon pass from him, and withal a great

thankfulness. Juliana's tide of emotion battled a little with her reserve. At last she turned to him passionately:

"Oh, indulge me in this! I have had dreams—such dreams in that garden!"

"But—my child! You would propose to join him there, then? Surely you do not mean to let him leave Florence without telling him your secret—that secret which you alone can tell——"

Juliana drew back into her chair and averted her head.

"I must wait till he comes for me," she said, and paused.

He saw the blood rise in the pure oval of her face. "I do not think," she said at last, "that he will leave Florence without me."

Spiridion (what was he there for, as he said himself, but to do the bidding of these two he loved?) in the course of the day obediently carried out his mission with all the diplomatic skill he flattered himself was peculiarly his own.

He found Wroth testing his strength by pacing the length of his terrace. The young man wheeled round, a flame in each cheek proclaiming the recent exertion. He had grown thinner, and an air of delicacy lent an extraordinary spirituality to his countenance.

"I have taken twenty turns," he cried, triumphantly. "That pestilent surgeon keeps me mewed up and thinks I am rolled about in a chair still—I have been a quarter of a mile to-day; I have reckoned it."

"Wait till you get to the hills, in the cool breezes," answered Spiridion, rubbing his hands. "Sit down now, my boy; you'll want all your vigour saved up for to-morrow. Eh, I've not been idle. And

I've been lucky. You've no idea what I have found for you. Such a place, such air, such scenery! An historic castle, what do you say to that? And only two hours' drive from Florence."

Wroth, who had let himself sink into his cushioned wicker couch with more alacrity than he would have been willing to confess, turned his eyes, fiercely eager, upon the speaker. The bright colour had begun to ebb from his face. Spiridion looked at the transparent hand, blue-veined, outflung with unconscious lassitude on the arm of the chair, trembling a little as it lay.

"It is high time indeed you should get out of this heat," he cried in concern. "And that is the beauty of my discovery—you can start, as I say, to-morrow——"

"To-morrow!" interrupted the other. The red leaped back into his cheek. Spiridion positively started at the fire of his glance. "To-morrow," repeated Wroth, closed his eyes, and leaned back against his cushions as one falling into a dream.

"Yes, yes," said Spiridion, soothingly. "Let me tell you now about this place," he went on as if to a child; he was alarmed at the sight of so wild a spirit in a frame still so weak. "Torre di Montemuscoli, an old mountain fortress, the seat of a once powerful family. It has been added to as late as the last century. Conceive the effect: mediæval tower on one side; and on the other, terraces designed by Rubattino—yes, terraces, my young friend, and gardens, they say, that——" Here Spiridion had an inspiration. "The rent," he said, "the rent is stiff, but that you will not mind." ("Now," he thought, "I have put off any possible suspicion.")

Wroth, leaning eagerly forward on one elbow, had devoured the description.

"Terraces, gardens," he repeated, "and not all dilapidated, not merely a kind of old raven's nest on a crag? A place in fact one could bring a lady to?" the phrase escaped him unawares. He whitened and shot a furtive glance at the old man.

"Eh, eh, we are coming to it," commented La Roche-Amand within. But, outwardly, he wore an air of such elaborate abstraction that, had Wroth been less absorbed in his own devouring thought, he must have perceived how transparently he was being humoured.

"Heavens," he went on aloud, "how well we are, on your shady terrace this hot afternoon! But this Arno hath a savour, none too agreeable. Dilapidated did you say? *Nenni*—the place is in magnificent repair, so they assure me, even luxurious. The last owner was a very rich man. He is dead, the race is extinct, his widow is glad to let. *Mon Dieu*, a young woman! what does she want in the mountains?—You authorise me then——?"

"Conclude, conclude!" cried Wroth. "I'll start to-morrow."

His leg flung over the side of the long chair, his hands on either arm, ready to rise, he was caught again by his deep dream.

Spiridion stood before him, waiting indulgently. Below stretched the Lung'Arno, half flaring sunshine, half deep shadow. Between the two banks the river shone copper green in the lee of the left; for the rest, one dazzling sparkle. The eye could scarce bear to rest on the whiteness of the further quay. With all the sunshine there was a puffing mischievous wind which blew as from a furnace, and carried swirls of dust in its fitful passage, together with scents from flower-laden walls—heavy pollen-laden

scents of lime blossom and clematis to mingle with the indescribable odours of sweltering water and baking street.

"It will be beautiful in the mountains," thought Spiridion; "he means her to come to him there," was the obvious intuition, he knew his own path lay now no longer with them; "this lover who knows not he is husband. There will be no place for the old man."

"Two hours' drive, did you say?" inquired Wroth, suddenly; "I will start at five to-morrow evening." Then he cried sharply, "But what are you doing here, Comte? Go, go and conclude the bargain! Hurry!"

The next morning Spiridion demanded to see Juliana before she had risen. So unusual a request filled her for a moment with alarm—the soul that loves is thus vulnerable: ever ready for misfortune. The first sight of her godfather's countenance, however, reassured her. It was quivering with suppressed amusement; and though it was perturbed too, the trouble was evidently of a humorous description.

"Forgive me, *filleule*," he began, "for this intrusion. I have had a letter"—an irrepressible chuckle broke from him—"and a conversation, early as it is, with that rascal Sebastien Picard who brought it. You will never guess, Juliana, what is preparing! Our young madman——" Again he broke off to chuckle. Juliana, more silent than ever these last weeks, spoke no word. She lay still among her pillows, in the semi-darkness, questioning with her eyes.

"My faith," he began afresh, "it is the most singular situation. If you had listened to me, child, you would have gone with your story to your husband a week ago. Well, well, young wills must find their way——" Here

he was interrupted by a long, approving sniff from Panton, who stood unnoticed by one of the great windows, her hand still on the undrawn purple curtain, in the attitude in which she had been surprised by Spiridion's entrance. The old man started slightly. "I thought we were alone," he said, warningly.

"Oh, you may speak freely!" said Juliana, "I am done with secrets; and besides, she has known from the beginning. Pull back the curtains, Panton; let in the air and the light. I am listening, godfather."

"I have here a letter," he resumed. "Oh, there are not many words in it.

> *Please tell Juliana I shall come and see her to-day, at a quarter to five o'clock, on my way to Torre.*—WROTH.

"Short and to the point, is it not? But now comes the kernel of my news. Sebastien—that rogue! regular *valet de comédie*—makes up for his master's laconism. Eh, *mon Dieu!*——" La Roche-Amand laughed again; yet there was a shade of anxiety in the eye he fixed upon the face among the pillows—these women's souls with their pride and their fierce sensitiveness, their straining at ideals and their childish susceptibilities, one never quite knew where to have them! "Our young man has formed a pretty little plan, it seems nothing else will serve him—he means to carry you off, my dear! An elopement *en règle*. Hé, it used to be quite the fashion in my young days—did matters come to a crisis: *Nous enlevons*! and all was right. But such a story as this; a man eloping with his own wife . . . and to her own house! Well—well, you can tell him the famous secret at last, Juliana, when he comes to you to-day, this hero, this madman, this lover of yours to run away with his own property."

He broke off, Juliana's eyes were lost in space, her hand crept up to the hidden ring in her bosom.

"She's off in a dream, off in a dream, faith, just as he did yesterday. Well, realities come soon enough—let them dream!" As for himself, La Roche-Amand felt with increasing conviction that his hour of interference was over. They were being drawn ever closer to each other by the irresistible force of attraction—nothing must come between them now; not even he who loved them best.

Panton stirred him from the reverie into which he himself was falling.

"I'd better be packing her ladyship's things, I'm thinking, and prepare to start for Torry myself, as soon as her ladyship has gone off with his lordship." She came to the foot of the bed, clasped its carved panel with both her plump hands, and looked pleasantly from her abstracted mistress to Spiridion, whose face was once more wrinkled with smiles. "I am glad his lordship has come to so sensible a decision. I am sure it is high time. I trust," she cried parenthetically, even in this moment of satisfaction, the habitual groan was not to be foregone, "that his lordship's health will not suffer for ever from the trouble he's been put through, poor young nobleman! I'm thinking, your ladyship, there's that box of French clothes we scarcely looked at after it come last July. There's a lemon-yellow morning robe, if I remember right, which ought to suit your ladyship wonderfully."

CHAPTER XXX

THE stroke of five was floating in the air from Santa Croce's deep bell, when Lord Wroth was announced in Battista's most ceremonious manner.

Juliana was alone in the great shaded saloon, her heart beating heavily. She had come to no resolution as to her conduct, save one: that she who had so long refused herself to her vow would now let herself be guided by his least wish. He might do with her as he pleased. Her first impulse was to wait till he came up to her. But at the end of the long room she thought she saw him sway as he advanced; even from that distance, and in the gray dimness, the ravages of his illness were but too apparent. So she rose and went quickly towards him, and they met midway.

He took her hand—his grasp was ice-cold. He made no attempt to draw her to him. All the tide of her full heart rushing to her lips at last, in tenderness, anxiety, womanly helpfulness, was checked by his first words, by the look he fixed upon her.

"I am here to fetch you. I am here to take you away with me. It has come to the end with me. If you refuse to go with me—then I, who returned to life only for you, will die here at your feet. It will be quite easy. I have but to tear apart that scarce

healed scar. When you kissed me that day, and the wound broke open and all my blood leaped, it was very sweet to feel my life flowing away for you. I lived because it is best to live for you, but the next best is to die because of you. Now you can choose."

He spoke in set tones that betrayed no emotion, like one who has long prepared what he has to say.

Juliana, looking up into his face, was terrified by its death-like hue, the wild light in his eyes, the savage determination of his expression. She dared as little reveal as resist—here indeed was no moment for dramatic disclosure. . . .

"Yes," she said, "yes, Wroth." Her accent was gently maternal. "Yes, I will come with you."

"Now?"

"Now. Where you will."

"Then come," he said. He dropped her hand and offered her his arm, still with that deadly air of composure that made her almost tremble for his reason.

As they went down the room, she could feel the effort with which he braced his weakness, and all her soul cried out to him in solicitude.

At the end of the gallery, Panton, with a business-like air, stood waiting, a cloak on her arm, a hat in her hand. She curtsied as they approached and went forward to robe her mistress. Wroth stood apart then, and Juliana saw him wipe his brow. Spiridion had completely effaced himself. No one but the servants helped them into the *calèche*, and in deep silence they drove away together.

Spiridion, at first lurking in a doorway of the gallery, and then hidden in an upper window, watched

the departure. In spite of himself there was a great sadness upon him as the last little flicker of dust fell back to the ground behind the carriage wheels. Doubts assailed him; the child of his adoption had gone from him, carried away in the whirl of a love as remorseless and lawless as it was passionate. Wroth had looked strangely, to his thinking: they all had been too precipitate, his health was as yet incompletely restored, his mental balance obviously disturbed. Spiridion was tormented by the thought that he could no longer watch over Juliana. Nothing left for him now but the few last details of business for her, the final household arrangements. Then . . . well then, the packing for his own departure.

He felt very old and desolate, as he descended the stairs and came along the gallery to seek his own apartment. But the sight of Panton, bonneted, shawled, weighted down on either side with huge bandboxes, moving her bulk, withal, with extraordinary celerity towards the hall, was an inspiriting spectacle.

"I am going, Mosser le Comte," she announced, turning her large, rubicund visage importantly towards him. "And God knows if I'll arrive alive along these heathen roads with no better protection than that flibberty French fellow of his lordship's! Yes, sir, Sebastien has come for me in his lordship's curricle, with his lordship's luggage. We arranged that between ourselves this morning, as soon as I saw in her ladyship's eye that she meant to do it at last. Why, if I'd waited for that old Battista, it would be midnight before I got to Torry."

So it was, after all, with a smile on his lips that Spiridion re-entered the little corner room where he had known such sunny and troubled hours.

Upon the mosaic table he found his courier awaiting him. There was a letter in an unknown hand, sealed with gigantic wafers. It was a bulky packet, and an enclosure fell out as he opened it. It was covered with a sprawling illiterate handwriting, and signed "Peggie Vaughan"; and with his unfamiliar acquaintance with English, it took him some time before he could decipher its purport.

Then he was filled with wonder at the irony of fate—six weeks ago, how much would the document have meant! How much anguish, sin and sorrow would it have averted! Now it was of less consequence than one of those faded fluttering petals the clematis about his window was casting upon the evening breeze. He began to read afresh. The letter was a strange self-revealing piece of work. As he laboriously made out sentence after sentence, the woman's nature, in all its pitiful perversion, was laid bare before him.

"Sir," she began, "I address myself to you, because I feel you are a gentleman that will act fair to a poor girl, and see she gets her rights after being made a catspaw of for other people's aims."—There was no use (she went on) in writing to her foster-sister, because she was as hard as nails. As for Lord Wroth, he was a madman, but she trusted "that you, sir, will see he does me justice after all I've gone through. . . ." And the pith of it all was, that having recovered from her illness, she had seen the evil of deceit, and was prepared to give up all pretension to Lord Wroth's name, on condition—it was humorous of poor Peggie to be making conditions, nevertheless it was with a keen eye to the main chance, as the context showed—on condition that the allowance due to her from Juliana, according to bargain, should not be discontinued; and

likewise that Lord Wroth should continue to pay the similar yearly sum, of which she had already received a first instalment. This was the least, she opined, that he could do as amends for his treatment of her. There were likewise the moneys left to her by the late Comte Mordante, to which Juliana knew she had as good a right as ever woman had.

The letter almost escaped Spiridion's fingers. Here was revelation indeed, here the explanation of much that had puzzled him in Juliana's attitude towards her dead husband—her bitterness, her reserve, her final and complete indifference to his memory! It was with a sensation of keen disgust that he forced himself to further perusal.

Peggie wound up by declaring, with her characteristic combination of impudence and pleading, that she had now an opportunity of settling herself in the world with a gentleman who had long been attached to her, Mr. Martindale—one well known to Lord Wroth himself. Were the necessary settlements made upon her, according to the desires above expressed, she naïvely remarked, there would be no difficulty about this marriage. But, were she denied—final threats of scandal and exposure alternated with pathetic appeals.

The old man flung the sheet from him on the table contemptuously. The creature should be paid her price because the name of Wroth was now sacred to Juliana, and her peace could not be bought too dearly. But as for the foolish being herself, what were her words, her threats? But as waves beating the foot of a lofty rock. They could cast up a little foam and slime from the troubled waters, no more.

He was absorbed in reflection; and on the painted walls of his room the ruddy sunset tints were beginning

to fade when the porter entering informed him that an English gentleman, who desired earnestly to speak with his Excellency, was awaiting him in the anteroom.

Spiridion read on the card presented by the man the name vaguely familiar:

Mr. Minchin,
Great St. Helen's.

CHAPTER XXXI

HASTILY thrusting Peggie's effusion into his breast-pocket, La Roche-Amand, with some feelings of impatience, descended the stairs. What could the stranger with the impossible name be wanting of him?

He found, pacing the anteroom, an angular, grey-faced man, the rigid decorum of whose attire and manner was pathetically at variance with the weariness and dishevelment of a long journey and of some evidently overpowering mental excitement and anxiety.

"You have desired to speak with me," said Spiridion, in his laboured English.

"Sir," began Mr. Minchin formally, with a stiff bow, "I have ventured to present myself." Then the emotion that possessed him broke forth. "Thank heaven, sir, you understand English! The stupidity of these Italians! I have been three hours, positively three hours, in endeavouring to find traces of my Lord Wroth —I was at last directed to you."

Spiridion interrupted, his face lighting up:

"Ah, now I comprehend—you are a friend of Lord Wroth. Will you not come in and be seated?"

He gave a genial wave of the hand; but suddenly pulled himself up, struck by a suspicion: perhaps this grimy and scarcely prepossessing person was some emissary of Peggie? It behoved the man of diplomacy to go warily.

"A friend of Lord Wroth? I trust I may call

myself at least a friend of the family he represents," said Mr. Minchin, as he passed into the *salon*. "Yes, I have tried to be a friend to Lord Wroth." A deep sense of personal injury betrayed itself in his grating voice, his thin lips folded themselves in repression, then he pursued: "I am his lordship's lawyer, sir. I and my forbears have done the business of the house of Wroth for a century."

Once again Spiridion's countenance cleared.—The famous lawyer!

"But how then, my good sir!" he cried, motioning his guest to a seat. "I am delighted to see you. Lord Wroth has become very dear to me, has grown into my heart, I may say——"

He paused. The face opposite to him expressed no sympathy with this expansiveness. Mr. Minchin cleared his throat slightly, and the sound expressed more eloquently than most words a dry divergence of sentiment.

"I have very important business with his lordship," he went on, "will you kindly inform me where I can find him? I have left England, at considerable inconvenience to myself—considerable inconvenience—not to speak of my business, and I have no time to spare. An intolerable journey, sir, I have travelled night and day, and the incompetence and insolence of the foreigners! Ahem! May I trouble you for Lord Wroth's address?"

Spiridion began to feel a gentle sense of malice rise within him. He leaned back in his chair and surveyed the features and form opposite to him with twinkling eyes. What a type, what a voice, what arrogance of legal importance, what middle-class self-assertiveness! And, to crown all, there was the skull under which had been conceived the mad scheme of Wroth's marriage!

Romance, therefore, must have been there. Romance in that living personation of document and dry law? *Diable,* what a race these English were! Wroth, the ardent, the beautiful, headlong lover on one side, and this being on the other, to have met and produced between them such folly and such success!

"I—I believe—nay, I feel empowered to assure you, sir, that it will be impossible for you to see Lord Wroth for some days to come."

His eyelids narrowed with amusement over the agitation Mr. Minchin instantly betrayed.

"But I must see Lord Wroth. It is imperative. Good heavens, you cannot have any conception of the importance of the situation! The fortune of the house of Wroth is at stake—the credit of my name, of the firm of Minchin, sir, a firm that has for centuries been noted for its ability, honoured for its integrity. Good God!" cried Mr. Minchin, mopping his brow with a dusty handkerchief, "have you any conception of the monstrous folly which your friend Lord Wroth is contemplating?" He checked himself on the verge of revelation, with a positive jerk.

Spiridion was quite enjoying himself. He would soon be able to relieve the worthy person's distress, and his kind heart found pleasure in the thought; but meanwhile he permitted himself to keep him a little longer in suspense, partly in punishment for the lawyer's atrocious manners, partly to gratify that sense of satisfaction in his own control of the situation—a satisfaction against which even the most philosophic are rarely quite proof.

"You mean," he said, joining his finger tips and speaking with great suavity, "you refer, doubtless, to that remarkable marriage contract into which Lord Wroth was induced to enter?"

Minchin's jaw dropped.

"You are aware of the facts, then," he snapped after a pause.

"*Mon Dieu, oui!*" Spiridion waved his delicate hand. "Have I not told you—milord is my very good friend?"

"Then you know, sir," exploded the attorney, "what I did to save his fortune. You know, sir, the impossible nature of the young man, his obstinacy, his profligacy! I—I—it required an extraordinary combination, a knowledge of the law which I may say no other man in England could have put into practice, to legalise such a situation, beside all the weight of my repute to carry it through. He ran me to twenty-six hours' limit—did you know that, sir?—and in twenty-six hours I did it. I acted against my conscience to rescue him from—from beggary." The admission leaped out before Mr. Minchin could check it. "And what is the return he makes me? Read that, sir, read that?"

Mr. Minchin, with trembling fingers, produced a pocket-book, extracted from it a docketed letter, and dashed it open before Spiridion. In Wroth's characteristic writing ran the following characteristic lines:

Hotel de l'Ecu de France. Compiegne.

MY DEAR MINCHIN,—*You got me into a diabolical scrape. You meant well, but I am not going to remain in it. I must and will be free. Break that marriage; I don't care at what cost to myself. You are so damned cunning: you'll find some way out of it, and save your own skin. I'm not going back on my word; I'll do nothing myself, I leave it all in your hands; you are clever enough, you can do it—you must.*

WROTH.

"Undo it! It cannot be undone. I can't do it, sir, I can't do it. If that marriage is broken, I am a broken man. The woman will fight. Lord Wroth will be a beggar; he's been spending money like water — money that would have to be refunded. There would be such a trial—such a scandal——"

Spiridion saw the moment had come for him to lay balm on the lawyer's anguish.

"Will it comfort you to know," he insinuated, "to know that milord has just started upon his honeymoon with his wife—and that that was my reason for suggesting he could not now be disturbed by details of business?"

Mr. Minchin's little grey eyes seemed to dart from their sockets, then his eyelids fluttered violently. A dull flush rushed to his grey face. He caught at his neckcloth.

"*Mon Dieu*, calm yourself!" cried the Count. "A glass of wine, sir? Nay, nay, I assure you all the information I have for you can only afford you satisfaction. This letter will help to enlighten you. Let us exchange documents."

Mr. Minchin, still speechless, snatched the letter with an eager clutch and rose to carry it to the window-seat under the waning light. Sharp exclamations escaped him before he had read many lines. He caught his brows in his hands as if his brain were reeling; then fell fiercely on the perusal again.

"What is this? Substitution at the altar, personation of one of the contracting parties—merciful heavens, now I remember indeed, the lady under the veil, the lady I conducted home from the church—I was struck with the difference—I thought it all acting, sir, all acting! And Lord Wroth is away with his wife, you say? This person he has married then, who

is she, what is she? For God's sake, answer quick, sir!"

Spiridion began with a gusto. Seldom had he tasted a moment of keener amusement and delight.

"The person, Monsieur Minchin, is a lady of highest rank, of remarkable beauty, of peerless reputation, of great fortune. She is the owner of this palace. She and Lord Wroth are this moment on their way to her castle in the mountains. She is the daughter of Sir Julian Tempest, late Ambassador in this country, and the widow of one of Florence's patricians. She was the Contessa Mordante Belgiojoso dei Vespi before she became Lady Wroth."

Mr. Minchin let his bony frame drop into a chair, overwhelmed. As the sonorous title fell lovingly from Spiridion's lips, he glanced pathetically at him as if to make sure that he was not the victim of a cruel hoax. But the sight of the aristocratic head, of its kindliness and dignity under the white hair, seemed to reassure him. He glanced down again at the letter in his hand. Here besides was documentary evidence.

Then, back in a flash upon him, came the memory of the register. Belgiojoso, that outlandish name which he had thought emanated solely from the actress's garish imagination—Belgiojoso—Beljoy . . . Mary Campbell . . . Belgiojoso, at least was real; the register correct whatever might come of the misused licence—bah, a scintilla, in the circumstances! All was technically safe. A weak chuckle shook him. It was the first genuine moment of satisfaction he had known these two months.

"Please excuse me," he said faintly at last, "the shock has been very sudden and I have been through considerable mental anxiety, not to speak of bodily

fatigue lately. If I might indeed have that glass of wine you were good enough to proffer. I thank you, sir. I will not conceal from you," said Mr. Minchin, his eyes watering after the first sip, "that you have removed an overwhelming weight from my mind."

"You give me pleasure," said Spiridion. Then he fixed his eyes rather severely upon the man of law. "For the future, sir, in your dealings with humanity, remember that money is not everything. The heart, Mr. Minchin, the soul, must be taken into consideration, or fatal indeed will be your interference."

"The heart, sir!" said Mr. Minchin, putting down his glass and looking across the table quite waggishly. Evidently an old sentimentalist, that foreign gentleman! But Minchin could afford to be generous: had it not been for these same material considerations of his . . . ? "I suppose I may understand, sir, that my young client is at last satisfied in that region? What an extraordinary story! Ah, I thought there must have been some attachment! They had met before, no doubt!"

"Aye, and loved," said Spiridion, briefly.

"And the lady was bound," suggested the lawyer with professional acumen. "The lady, I take it, is not long a widow."

He read his answers in the other's sudden and haughty air of reserve. Then, moved by a fresh train of thought, he turned once more to Peggie's letter. "I will deal with this matter, if you please," he said. "I fear it will be wise—it is worth a sacrifice, to avoid scandal—to yield to some of this young woman's demands. My client can well afford it, besides."

"No doubt, Lady Wroth would wish it so," said Spiridion, rising to put an end to the interview.

"But I shall tie her up, sir," said the lawyer, nodding. He had quite recovered his professional decisiveness of manner. "I shall make stringent conditions. Our young couple need never fear that she shall trouble them again."

CHAPTER XXXII

PERHAPS the strangest experience of all these strange months for Juliana, was that drive from Florence to Montemuscoli. From first to last Wroth spoke not one single word.

Until they had reached the open country he did not turn his head, even to look at her; but as the uphill road broke at last into the fields and vineyards he stirred from his immobility and fixed his gaze upon her. Then she saw a kind of incredulous joy drive something of the savage purpose from his eyes. After a little while he took her hand in his; but his lips were set as if they would never unlock again. His mood alarmed, puzzled, distressed her. She clasped her fingers round his still death-cold hand, longing to pour her vitality into him, and she was glad at length when she felt his palm grow warm beneath her touch. Again and again the words arose in which the truth was to be made known to him, but his unnatural air, the terror of the possible effect upon him, the very absence of all that demonstrative passion she had once dreaded, conspired to keep her dumb. Juliana, who had sinned by silence, was now by silence punished, almost beyond endurance.

They whirled along upon a cloud of dust, under a sky where the fierce radiance of the Italian day was fast giving place to the exquisite serenity of evening. Wroth, it seemed, had had his horses chosen for speed;

and even up the ascending causeway they kept an extraordinary pace. The gay bells of their harness rang out a ceaseless chime to the serried rhythm of their hoofs. Now and again the fragrance of a bean-field flooded their way with an almost overpowering sweetness. Along the familiar road Juliana saw the old landmarks rise, with a mixture of yearning and apprehension. Here the wave-like slopes of vineyards; here the mystery of olive groves; here the incomparable green of the maize. She knew that cypress group on the advancing knoll, that cluster of red roofs round the quaint cupola of the church, with its frescoed front; she knew that lonely stretch of road, shadowless, broken only by the wayside shrines with the awful figure of the dead Christ—that minded her, with a sudden stab of recollection, of the Gothic crucifix in yonder room in the castle, now shut for ever from usage—and of the night that with Count Cesare's death brought her her freedom. Far otherwise had she pictured her home-coming with the beloved. The weight upon her heart increased, as the airs grew keener about them. The road took ever steeper turns; the luxuriance of the country fell away, and she recognised that she was approaching the mountain stronghouse. The shadows which had been deepening in the valley gave place again to a mellow radiance on the height.

And now the last steep ascent brought even their courageous team to a foot-pace. In sudden rosy glow of dying sunset she saw the great arch of the entrance gate rise before her; and beyond, those frowning masses of masonry, jutting to the very edge of the crag that no sunshine ever seemed to illumine, so dark they stood and so wrapt, as it were, in a tragedy of old memories. None, gazing on the front that the

Torre de Montemuscoli thrust upon the world, could have guessed of those gay terraces, of that irresponsible rococo wing at the rear, with its balustrades and its statues, its little fountains, formal boxwood hedges, flower-filled urns, and the riot of colour and blossom which every summer let free in the gardens.

At sight of the well-known gateway Juliana disengaged her hand quickly from the clasp that held it so fiercely. She felt Wroth's sharp glance of inquiry, as she drew the purple scarf from her shoulders and cast it over her hat and face like a great enveloping veil. Her hands were trembling in flurry. She thought of her servants' inevitable recognition, and the consequent abruptness of disclosure. It had never dawned upon her as possible that the silence between them should have lasted all the long way, to the very doors, indeed, of her home.

The children ran out at the gateway house to stare at the foreign gentleman, for whose coming the whole castle had been in preparation since the message by courier of the night before.

"Ahi, he's got a lady with him!" cried the black-eyed portress (for all of whose swarthy brood Juliana stood godmother). "Run, Giuseppe, run and warn Zia Vanna."

Zia Vanna in person stood curtseying at the great door. Juliana rather dreaded the latter's piercing gaze; but she was allowed to pass, apparently without recognition, for the curtsey was marked by reserve as to a stranger. How, indeed, could the decorous Zia Vanna permit herself to imagine that her mistress would return with a stranger, flaunting colours too, and his Excellency the noble Count not yet nine months in his vault? She showed the newcomers ceremoniously into a cool, gay, painted room, opening wide to the

terrace, full of the garden's fragrance, and then withdrew, announcing refreshments; she craved indulgence for the delay—she had not expected a lady.

The door closed. They were alone. Now they stood a moment opposite each other, she still veiled. Then she flung the scarf from her, casting her shadowing hat away with it, and turned towards him, hands outstretched. The tears that she would not shed misted her eyes; she tried to smile, but her lips quivered; his gaze was upon her, gloomy, miserable, brooding, his evil gaze—he looked so ill, her poor boy, and so wicked! There was no longer any sense of offence within her; no uprising of outraged virtue. She felt towards him as a mother may who sees her blind child struggling and wounding himself amid stones and brambles, with the fair path lying close to him if he only knew it.

Again an interminable half minute ticked itself away—it must, then, be hers to break the great silence. She sank into a chair.

"Wroth—" she said tenderly; her eyes dropped and a deep colour flooded her face.

At the sound of her voice the self-control which held him, and which seemed at once so rigid and so desperate, broke from him completely. He fell at her feet as if he had been struck down, and caught hold of the folds of her dress.

"I cannot do it—no, no, I will not do it; you are the white lily, I will not break you, I will not shame you! Oh, to see you veil yourself when you approached the house! You, Juliana, to be shamed! Go," he cried wildly, "go. Better death, better the hell of my life without you, than joy at such a price!"

And so out of the very intensity of his lawless love,

and at the very moment, it seemed, of its victory, had sprung the renunciation without which she once had vowed she would not give herself. Spiridion's words came back to her: "Where it is right, never fear love, never fear to love. By love alone is love sanctified."

Juliana flung her arms about her lover as he knelt; the tears streamed down her cheek.

"Beloved! I shall never leave you. It is my right to stay with you. . . . O my dear one, I am your wife! It was I who stood beside you at the altar, it was on my finger you placed your ring. See, love, your ring that I have worn over my heart, in secret, ever since. Beloved, look at the ring and believe —I am your wife!"

As he lifted his head, still with the look of agony upon it, she cried again: "I am your wife!" It was no moment for her long story, maze of deception and mystification; no moment to plead her guilt or her excuses. She could not even stop to think of any way to prepare him, to soften the shock to his enfeebled frame. She must ease that pain, that torture of his soul, at any risk.

And for a moment, indeed, she thought she had killed him. His head fell back on her knee, his lips grew livid. She laid her own upon them, pressing kiss upon kiss, until the warmth of life came back to them, until his arms caught her close, and she felt as if she were swooning away in her turn upon the tide of his passion.

Below, in the garden, the serried lilies flung evening incense to the paling sky. The cypress trees were growing black against the horizon, one single faint yellow star trembled low between them—the garden of Juliana's dream!

EPILOGUE

It was September once again over the Kentish wolds, and much such a night as that which had brought Juliana Mordante out of the well-ordered road of her life up the wild avenue of Hurley.

Across the wrack-strewn sky the autumn moon rode high, and cast swift cloud images like flying scud over the wide stretches of the Abbey park. Bare still of its pride lay the land, but waste and empty no longer: for where every giant had been felled stood now a sapling that flung a lengthened quivering shadow on the moon-white grass. The great-grandchildren of the house of Wroth would play in their day under leafy shelter, and hear the singing of birds amid mighty branches.

Majestic, even in decay, the Abbey had ever stood. To-night the fantastic rays hid rather than displayed the recent work of restoration; the cloisters cast shadows, not as heretofore upon rank grass and broken stony patches, but on velvet sward; a shaft of fountain spray from the depth of a shrubbery now and again caught the gleam, like a stave of song leaping into the light. There was a fragrance of autumn flowers on the wide wind from sheltered gardens. As in the end of a fairy tale, the spell it seemed had been broken, the curse allayed; the Abbey was Hurley-burly no more, but fitly Lady's Grace.

Within its walls where, behind close-shuttered

windows, a large and decorous household slept the sleep of the self-righteous, one unquiet spirit yet watched the night. Bertram, a shaded candle in his hand, wandered from place to place, up stairs and down, through echoing corridors and shrouded rooms, inspecting, pondering, touching here a fold of curtain, replacing there a chair with trembling hand; and ever at his heels, Brutus the hound, with drooped head and tail, sedately picking his way. Now and then the old man would pause, muttering to himself, and the hound would raise his great head, wise eyes gleaming out of the dark, tail faintly wagging.

Once Bertram drew a letter from his breast and, holding it to the light of his candle, began to con it over, as if for the first time. Yet well did he know it—by heart. How many times, since that happy June hour when it had come to him, had he not read it and rejoiced afresh? "Dear old Bertram," ran the familiar lines, "you remember the lady who was blown in upon us like a bird by the wind, that night of our last revelry at Hurley? You remember how you said to me, that night—'A true lady, my lord!' Oh, Bertram, you remember how lovely she is and how good! She is my wife now and I am happy. We shall soon come home. Dear old Bertram, I know you will be glad!" Aye, Bertram remembered and was glad. His boy had found one worthy of him. The old, wicked, sorrowful days were over, and the master would soon be home! And now the moment was actually at hand, the morrow was to see it, see the home-coming of Wroth and his bride.

Bertram, folding the precious sheet and replacing it over his heart, looked round the hall and began to picture to himself the scene of arrival—till the fear seized him lest he scarce be spared life for such joy.

A wild cry, piercing the outer wind-swept stillness with its lament, startled him out of his rapt musings; the hound at his side growled deeply. But Bertram smiled and fell to muttered speech again, half to his dumb companion, half to himself. That was old Lupus, baying at the moon from his pen in the kennels . . . and no doubt Professor Brown was grunting in his pit, and padding it up and down, for such wild moonlit nights made the wild things restless . . . Aye, aye, the wolf and the bear—a mad lad to have such favourites! My lord would be content to find them in good case. . . . "But you and I, Brutus, are growing old. Eh, your muzzle there is well nigh as white as my head! We were none too young when he left us. . . . and six months makes a deal of difference at our age. Eh, Brutus, we've missed the master sore!"

All was in order against the morrow, from my lady's boudoir overlooking the walled garden, to the suite of rooms for the honoured guest my lord was bringing with him, anent the preparation of which he had sent such minute instructions, and for whose use (an important personage evidently and a musician) the grand new pianoforte had arrived but yesterday from London town.

"All's ready," said Bertram to the hound, "and now one last look at the church—eh, Brutus?"

The wind was singing among the pinnacles as, followed by his grave-eyed companion, he crept through the holy-haunted spaces, moving in his own faint radius of light like some little spectral sacristan called back to old duties with the midnight disquietude of ghosts. Now the altar-table of the sanctuary shone out in the glimmer—restored to its high place; never again should any but sacramental cup be raised above it—now the faint flame flittered from pillar to pillar, arrested here

and there to illumine some recovered statue, majestic in its niche.

On a corner of the Abbot's monument Bertram set his lantern down and paused to rest, while Brutus subsided at his feet, and stretched his head between his paws with a great sigh of comfort. The old man's mind was busy painting the dim spaces with tender-coloured visions of his own: "They'll be christening the heir in here, one day," he was thinking. "If the Lord would but let me live to see that"! . . . .

A small secret air, sweeping vaguely through the church, set the flame a-dancing: it played on the wrinkled face that trembled between smiles and tears; on the marble countenance beneath it, on its upward gaze, its strong serenity seeking ineffable distances. Abbot Ambrose lay as he had lain through all the years of desecration and revelry, as he would lie in these returning times of order and dignity: indifferent with the high indifference of eternity to the changes of this world's fleeting show.

THE END

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